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WELCOME

Back in early August, I took little notice when the news started to emerge that Lionel Messi might genuinely leave Barcelona. I expected the whole thing to blow over – he'd stay at the Camp Nou, just like 12 months earlier. Footballers play for power all the time. Why would this situation be any different?

But this *was* different. Messi didn't want to leave Barça. They didn't want to lose Messi. And yet, all parties had no other choice; unable to afford him any longer, he was left with no alternative but to exit on the priciest of freebies.

In joining PSG, Messi has linked up with ex-team-mate Neymar and World Cup winner Kylian Mbappe, forming one of the most formidable front threes ever... on paper. But as Brian Clough once said, "We had a good team on paper. Unfortunately, the game was played on grass."

So how will 'MNM' fare? Will they deliver PSG an elusive Champions League, or tear one another apart in trying?

On the subject of great forwards, there weren't many better than Jimmy Greaves, who scored goals freely for club and country before his fine second career in broadcasting.

I was fortunate enough to interview him at the start of my career, and he was as charming and charismatic as he came across on TV. He'll be missed.

James Andrew
@JamesAndrew_
@FourFourTwo

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1 Which player hung from bannisters to make his arms longer

2 Which World Cup star has released his own movie, *Cop Secret*

3 Why a clown turned up at a ground in the EFL – with a coffin

4 Which Arsenal great is often spotted paying a visit to the Royal Ballet

5 Which club opted to field a 60-year-old former bank robber upfront

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"Brian Clough tripped my advisors up with his squash racket – their briefcases went flying. I thought, 'This meeting won't go well...'"

PETER SHILTON

For nearly half a century, Peter Shilton lived a double life. Widely known as a two-time European Cup winner, England's most-capped men's player and someone with a world-record 1,390 competitive appearances to his name, Shilton did his best to hide a gambling addiction that consumed him away from the football pitch.

"It lasted 45 years," he explains to *FourFourTwo*. "Horse racing was my thing. I was quite well-known from the age of 17, so going into a bookmakers wasn't ideal, but you could pick up the phone and put on a bet. It started out as a hobby, but gradually accelerated in the 1980s and '90s. When internet betting began, I lost £800,000 with one exchange company."

With the support of his wife, Steph, Shilton finally stopped gambling six and a half years ago – and the pair have written a book called *Saved*, in an attempt to help others and show that the addiction can be defeated.

Somehow, Shilton was able to prevent his secret from affecting his playing career. "I could separate the two – football was the No.1, and I was dedicated to it," says the 72-year-old. Off the pitch, his losses were beginning to mount up. On the pitch, he enjoyed considerably more success; that much is clear, as he answers your questions...

What were the most important lessons you learned from Gordon Banks when you were a teenager with him at Leicester City [below]?
Olu Soga A, Lagos
I was at Leicester from the age of 10, and I used to watch him. I became an apprentice at 15 and quickly got into the reserves, and we'd train together. His positional play was superb – he always seemed to be in the right place, waiting for the shot – and so was his work ethic. He'd do more training on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons – extra shooting and crossing practice, which was unheard of, because there were no goalkeeping coaches then.

I looked at other keepers, too. Peter Bonetti was great at Chelsea: he was only small but he bounced around the goal like a little rubber ball. And Lev Yashin wore all black, so he looked intimidating before he'd even started.

Is it true you'd hang from a pull-up bar to try to make your arms longer?
Stuart Lockhart, via Instagram
[*Laughs*] When I was 10 or 11, I wasn't really growing and I was worried that I wouldn't be tall enough to become a keeper. I thought doing stretching exercises on the wall might help me. My family had a greengrocer's shop with some bannisters, so one day I thought that if I hung from them, my mum could pull down on my ankles. I only did it a couple of times, but I told a reporter years ago and people still remind me of it! My arms are quite long, though – I think it's a family trait.

Only a year after the 1966 World Cup, Leicester sold Banks and made you their No.1. Was that a lot of pressure?
Mary Norman, Melton Mowbray
I'd played my first three or four games when I was an apprentice, because Gordon was away with England. One or two clubs were interested in me, even at 17, and I think Leicester took the long-term view. Gordon was only 29 and still a great goalkeeper, so it did put a lot of pressure on me, but I never really felt it. I just felt that if I trained hard, I was confident in my ability. The club's decision paid off, really, because when I was transferred to Stoke in 1974, it was for £325,000 [a world-record fee for a goalkeeper].

More than a thousand domestic appearances... and one goal. Rubbish return! Tell us about your single goal.
@pateman80, via Instagram
[*Smiles*] I was 18 and we went down to Southampton on a wet and windy day. I had five years at The Dell later in my career, and the mist used to come over the ground late in the afternoon – sometimes you couldn't see the other goal for the last 10 or 15 minutes. We were winning 4-1 when I picked up the ball and just whacked it down the middle. The wind was behind it, our left-winger, Mike Stringfellow, was chasing it, and I lost sight of it in the mist. There was this big roar and the lads came back, saying, "Well done, Shilts!" I thought it was because I'd kicked a long ball and Stringy had scored. All the way home, the lads were saying, "You scored!" and I was saying, "No, you're taking the mickey". It wasn't until I got home and put on the news that I realised I had!

Did you think the 1969 FA Cup Final would be the first of many for you?
David Hinshelwood, Corby
I did. I'd watched Leicester lose two cup finals in 1961 and 1963 – I went to the 1963 final, when they lost to Manchester United. When we got to Wembley in 1969, I was desperate to win because I was a Leicester fan as well. It was a big disappointment when we lost 1-0 to Manchester City. I got to so many semi-finals after that – another with Leicester, a couple with Southampton – but I never reached another FA Cup final. It wasn't to be.

How did it feel, playing for England?
Archie Scholes, via Instagram
Making my debut in 1970 was a great moment. I went to the 1970 World Cup for a month, which was a brilliant experience, but I didn't quite make the final 22 that was named by Sir Alf Ramsey just before the tournament,

CLUBS (PLAYER)

1966-74 Leicester
1974-77 Stoke
1977-82 Nottingham Forest
1982-87 Southampton
1987-92 Derby
1992-95 Plymouth
1995 Wimbledon
1995 Bolton
1995-96 Coventry
1996 West Ham
1996-97 Leyton Orient

COUNTRY

1970-90 England

CLUBS (MANAGER)

1992-95 Plymouth

so I came home with a few other players. Then, in November, I was given my debut against East Germany at Wembley. I'd played for England at schoolboy, youth and under-23 level, so it completed the set – I think it had only been done once before. I was just over the moon to play behind Bobby Moore. We won 3-1; the first thing I did was kick a ball down the middle which was flicked on for Francis Lee to score.

I was understudy to Gordon Banks for a couple of years. He had at least another couple of years ahead of him when he had his car crash [in 1972], which was very sad because he lost an eye. I was elevated to England's No.1 goalkeeper and I had to get on with it.

You had a great battle with Ray Clemence for the England jersey. How many more caps do you think you would have won if he hadn't been around in the same era?
Tony Chada, via Facebook
He got over 60 caps, so probably at least another 40 or 50. We were deadly rivals, but great friends. We roomed together for 10 years and always got on really well. Football never came between us – we just didn't discuss it. If he was picked for a game, we would go back to the room and it would be a bit quiet for an hour, then we'd get on with it.

How was your time at Stoke? Was Tony Waddington good to work for?
Dave Tilstone, via Facebook
When I joined Stoke, it was great: we went top of the old First Division, but fell away in the end because we got a couple of injuries. The next season, we were halfway up the league when the roof blew off the stand during a storm and they had to sell everyone to pay for it. From then on, it went downhill. But Tony Waddington had been instrumental in me going to Stoke, because I always wanted to play for managers I liked and trusted. He was a real man-manager.

Could you have done anything to push through your proposed transfer to Manchester United? We lacked a consistently top goalkeeper, and I'm sure we would have been title contenders with you in goal.
Jason Reidy, Cork
They tried to sign me when I was 15, but my dad didn't feel I should be moving home at that age. Then, when I was at Stoke, we'd just got relegated and my former team-mate, Jimmy Greenhoff, phoned me up. I suppose these days it would be tapping up – he said, "Tommy Docherty is coming in this week to sign you." I was quite pleased, because I'd done as much as I could for Stoke, but two days later Tommy got the sack [after an affair with the physio's wife became public]. Maybe it was fate that I didn't join United, and joined Forest instead.

How did you feel on that day at Coventry in 1978 when you won the title with Nottingham Forest?
Patrick Aston, via Facebook
It was a great achievement. I joined a very up-and-coming team who'd just been promoted to the First Division and were only going to get better. We had players with great experience like Kenny Burns, Larry Lloyd and John McGovern; young players such as Viv Anderson and Tony Woodcock; the unknown John Robertson, a genius little winger; and Martin O'Neill, too.

We had a few games left and only needed a point, but that's the league game I remember the most because I made a flying save from Coventry's centre-forward, Mick Ferguson, which is on YouTube. It was probably my most famous save in league football, because we won the league that day. To get that 0-0 draw was one of the highlights of my career.

Brian Clough was well-known for his man-management. What impact did he have on you and your career?
John Carroll, via Instagram
When I joined the club, I noticed such a difference to what I'd experienced before – the way the players reacted; the way the club was run. There was an air of discipline around the club, but it was also very relaxed: everybody was treated the same, from the tea lady and secretary right up to the top players. There was a great atmosphere. Clough and Taylor just had something magical about them. It's like making a great cake: you've got to have the right ingredients. It all fitted together. That team was so good. [*FFT*: We hear you bonded with Clough when you told him you weren't a massive Don Revie fan...] I didn't realise how much they hated each other! Revie had a great record at Leeds but wasn't my type of manager. He didn't play me much [for England] – he preferred Ray Clemence.

Clockwise from right
Teenage Shilts could've auditioned for Bond (or the villain); Ramsey gave Shilton his first cap the day after this was taken; two European Cup finals and two 1-0 wins – job done; that international debut in 1970; the *Joker* sequel was unexpected

What's your favourite Clough story?
Marko Ivic, via Instagram
When I first met him, I was really low because Stoke were struggling and I was out of the England team. Brian had previously tried to sign me for Derby, and when he joined Forest I went over to meet him. We had lunch together and really hit it off.

Then, when he was signing me from Stoke, I went to the City Ground with two advisors – they were businessmen in Leicester and I called them advisors, but you'd say they were agents now. Cloughie stood there in his rugby top, shorts and scruffy trainers and said, "Go in that room down there – I'll see you in five minutes." An hour later, we were summoned, and I thought, 'Jesus, I don't know if I fancy this', even though I knew him by this point. I said to my advisors, "You'd better go first", but as they walked into the room, they tripped and their briefcases had papers coming out everywhere – Cloughie was sat on the floor, tripping them up with his squash racket! I thought, 'This isn't going to go very well'.

We talked to him and he was really off, then finally he said, "Right, I've had enough of this" and strolled out. I was gutted – I thought I'd lost my chance to sign for Cloughie. The next morning, the phone went and he said [*puts on Brian Clough voice*], "I want to see you in a hotel in Derby." As I walked in, on my own, Clough and Peter Taylor were there with a bottle of champagne. It took me about 15 minutes to agree terms. He had his own way of doing things, but signing for him was the best decision I ever made.

Did you really train in the middle of a roundabout to prepare for the 1980 European Cup Final in Madrid?
Wes Robson, Basingstoke
Yes! Before the final we went to Cala Millor in Mallorca, because we'd played 65 matches with a small squad that season and Cloughie's idea was to rest and get some energy back. We trained every day, but it was just a little bit of running and passing. As a goalkeeper, you want to dive around, but I couldn't find any grass. Peter Taylor told me, "When we get to Madrid, the hotel is in the mountains but we've got a lush training pitch – you'll get a couple of good sessions there." I thought, 'Thank Christ for that'. We got there, though, and the training pitch was like a hard tennis court. I started to complain that I couldn't dive on it, and that I needed to train before the European Cup final, and Cloughie said, "Go and find some grass" – so that's how it happened.

It's quite funny, because one of Viv Anderson's friends was there a couple of days before the match. After driving around this roundabout, he phoned Viv and asked, "Was I hallucinating? I think I saw Peter Shilton training on a traffic island." But it was probably my best game for Forest, along with the one at Coventry, so it worked out well!

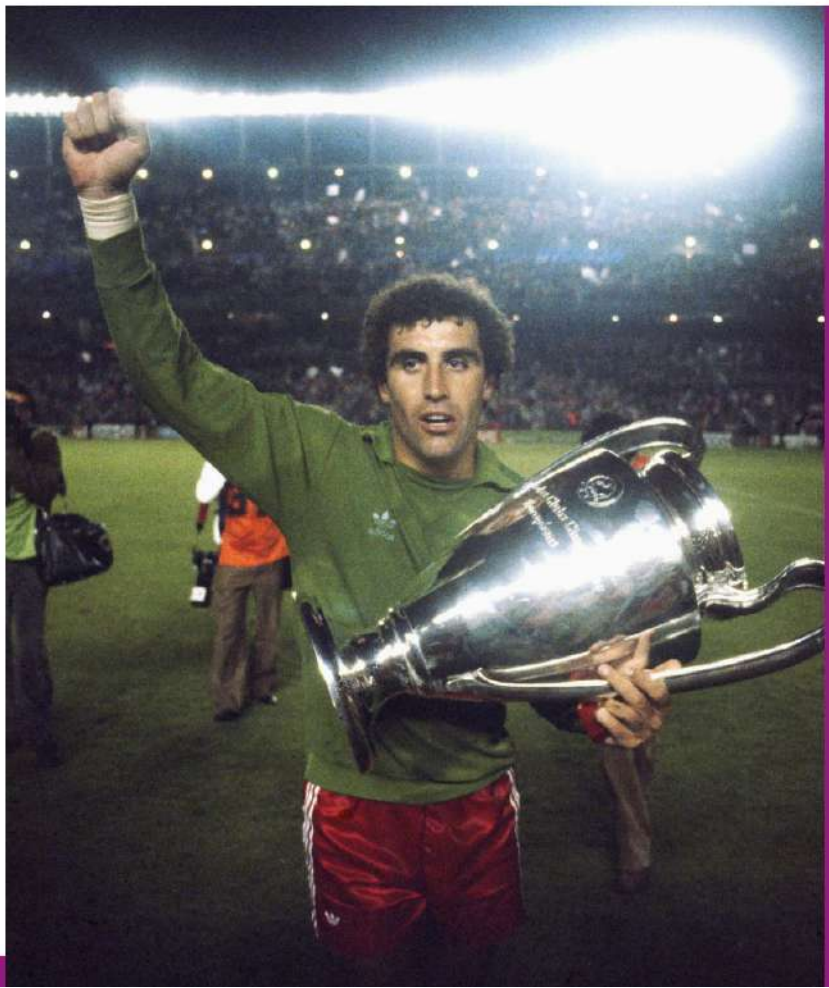
Could a club of Forest's size win top European honours ever again?
Emilio Martinez Baniela, via Facebook
I think it'd be very hard now, with the way money rules football. They were unbelievable times – to win the league, two European Cups, a League Cup and the Super Cup as well. We had a great spirit and the team was well-balanced.

> "CLOUGH AND TAYLOR JUST HAD SOMETHING MAGICAL ABOUT THEM. IT ALL FIT TOGETHER"

What do you regard as your greatest victory or performance for England?
Jen Fredericks, Manchester
There are two. There was England vs Scotland in 1973, when I was trying to establish myself after Gordon Banks. There were 100,000 at Wembley, and those games were massive – if you lost, you'd go back to your club and get stick from the Scottish players for the next year. We were winning 1-0 and I'd already made a couple of really good saves when Billy Bremner took a corner that was cleared to the edge of the box. Kenny Dalglish hit a shot going across me to my left. I went with my left arm, realised I wasn't getting it, then brought my right arm over and just managed to touch it away from the top corner. We won 1-0 and that established me in the England team.

The other game came after the bad experience I had later in 1973, when we failed to beat Poland at Wembley and didn't qualify for the World Cup. I blamed myself for their goal – the ball was hit hard, but it skidded and went under me. To qualify for Italia 90, we needed a draw in Poland. We were overrun in the first half but I made four or five saves I was proud of, and we got a 0-0 draw to qualify. That meant a lot to me. It felt like payback.

You and Ray Clemence shared the goalkeeping duties in the build-up to Spain 82, but you got the nod at the World Cup itself. How did that feel?
@FerranFpl, via Twitter
Neither of us were particularly happy that we had to alternate, although it ▸



did keep us both in tune with playing for England. Ron Greenwood said, "I'll pick one of you for the World Cup", and the morning we knew he was due to tell us his decision, we went onto the training pitch – whereas we used to go out together, this time Ray went to the right and I went to the left.

I'd never been so nervous – I hadn't played at the World Cup as we hadn't qualified in 1978 either, and I badly wanted to. Ron walked out, turned to the right, put his arm around Ray and Ray's head dropped. At that moment, I knew. Although Ray was a friend of mine, I was elated that I was going to play at the World Cup. [*FFT*: Was there really a tank outside the training ground at that tournament?] There was. It was in the Basque territory, in Bilbao, and security was heavy at the start – people with big rifles around the hotel. It relaxed after a few days.

How frustrating was it to concede just one goal in five games at the 1982 World Cup but nonetheless go out in the second group stage?
Liam Bennett, Newcastle
Very frustrating for me as a goalkeeper. We had a good defence, so if we could have just scored a few more goals, we would have had a great chance. Kevin Keegan and Trevor Brooking were both injured and I honestly think that if we'd had those two fit, we would have won that World Cup, or had a great chance. But we drew 0-0 with West Germany and Spain, so missed out on the semis despite going unbeaten throughout the tournament. They did away with the second group stage afterwards. They shouldn't have introduced that, as it became very tactical.

Why did you leave Nottingham Forest for Southampton in 1982?
Edward Kelly, Lymington
I just felt that the team that had been so successful had broken up a bit; new players were coming in and we weren't the same team any more. I probably needed a new challenge. I had a really good spell at Southampton – it was a good five years. We reached three semi-finals – two in the FA Cup – and finished as runners-up in the league, which was a fantastic achievement.

How did it feel to be on the receiving end of two of the most famous goals in football history, scored by Diego Maradona at the 1986 World Cup?
@Sandaniel90, via Twitter
It's not a game I remember fondly, especially the first goal, as it cost us a place in the semi-finals. Maradona realised he wasn't getting the ball. Instinct told me that I could get there before him, and I had to dive a bit earlier than I wanted because he was favourite, but I was just getting above him. If you'd cut his left arm off, I was getting the ball. He cheated and got away with it. I do blame the referee and the linesman – it was their job to see that. [*FFT*: The Goal of the Century came four minutes later – would it have happened without the first goal?] I always say he was a great player and did terrifically well, but a lot of the lads said they were so gutted with the first goal that they weren't really switched on. You feel so down after that sort of goal, and maybe they would have made it a bit harder for him to do that amazing dribble. Take nothing away from him – he did great – but I think we would have made it harder for him.

Clockwise from above
Denying Dalglish with a career-highlight save at Wembley; Shilton had no problem with Maradona's right hand; "Unlucky" in 1990; but on the other hand...

Did you ever meet Maradona again after his Hand of God moment?
Frank Halton, Gloucester
Never. I said that unless he apologised, I'd never shake his hand – there was a little bitterness between him and not just me but other England players such as Terry Butcher, because he never said sorry. There were times when I was offered money to meet him, but I said, "Look, he's got to apologise, then we'll shake hands and draw a line under it." He wasn't prepared to do that, so it didn't come about.

HIGHS & LOWS

HIGH: 1970
Makes England debut having been in the second tier that year

LOW: 1973
Misses out on 1974 World Cup with mistake against Poland

HIGH: 1978
Named PFA Player of the Year as Nottingham Forest secure title

LOW: 1991
Relegated from top flight for third time in career, this time at Derby

HIGH: 1997
Reaches world-record 1,390 competitive appearances

How was your time at Derby under the ownership of Robert Maxwell?
Jason Palmer, Burton
Like a lot of people these days, he wanted to invest and make the club a big one. He signed me, Mark Wright and Dean Saunders, and initially it was great. I played for Arthur Cox, a tough, down-to-earth manager I respected. We started off really well. Then, like at Stoke, the money dried up, and the rest is history with Robert Maxwell. It went a bit sour in the end but the club was great, the Baseball Ground atmosphere was terrific and I was pleased to play in the 1990 World Cup while I was there.

How good was that England squad at Italia 90?
Donal J O'Driscoll, via Facebook
It was a great squad. We started the tournament very slowly, but when we played Belgium we came alive. When David Platt scored that brilliant volley from Gazza's free-kick with the last kick of extra time, we thought, 'Here we go, we're on our way'. We got better as the tournament went on but probably didn't score enough goals. We had Gary Lineker and David Platt scoring, but Chris Waddle was unlucky a couple of times against the Germans. We were unlucky not to get to the final.

What went through your head when Andreas Brehme's free-kick in the semi-final deflected off Paul Parker, looping over you and into the net?
Rob Taylor, Milton Keynes
It all happened in a split-second. The semi-final was end-to-end but it was going well – I had four or five saves to make, and one from Jurgen Klinsmann that I was very pleased with. But the

deflection was a fluke, and exactly what a goalkeeper doesn't want.

Deflections are so difficult to deal with. You're expecting a direct shot from just outside the box, but it hit Paul Parker – who was very unlucky because it was his job to try to block free-kicks – and it just changed the shot completely. It became a chip. As a keeper, you're square-on and you come out to narrow your angle – suddenly you need a totally different technique, because you've got to turn your body side-on to move backwards and leap into it. I didn't have time to do that in that split-second, so I had to improvise and shuffle my feet backwards. In the end, it went in the one place that would've beaten me. It was a very unlucky goal to concede.

When you were playing, goalkeepers weren't allowed to move on the line when a penalty was being taken. Did that make it harder to save them?
Paul Hugh Gallagher, via Facebook
You couldn't move back in those days but a lot of keepers went a bit early, guessed whichever way and went for it. I tended to wait as long as I could, because I felt that the pressure was on the penalty-taker – a lot of them hit it within reach of the keeper, rather than right in the corner. If you move a bit too early, the ball can be struck right down the middle. In the semi-final shootout in 1990, I waited as long as I could and went the right way every time, but each penalty was hit like a rocket and pretty much in a corner.

I only faced four penalties, because we had the misfortune of Stuart Pearce more or less hitting it straight at the goalie and Chrissy Waddle putting it over the crossbar. It's hard to tell you exactly how I felt then. Your stomach just drops. You walk off and realise that your dream has ended. I'd had three goes at the World Cup: it should have been five, but I hold the record of 10 clean sheets – the joint-best with Fabien Barthez. When you look at the three tournaments I played in, we were unbeaten in the first, cheated out of the second, and beaten in a penalty shootout in the third. We were so near yet so far from a final.

"HE CHEATED. IF YOU'D CUT HIS LEFT ARM OFF, I WAS GETTING THE BALL AHEAD OF HIM"

You won a men's record 125 England caps. What do they mean to you?
Greg Morter, via Facebook
The record I hold is something I'm proud of – people have got close but it's going to be really difficult to beat, especially in the modern game. You can never say never, though. There are one or two players who could play on for a long time, such as Jordan Pickford or maybe Harry Maguire. If anybody does beat it, I'll be the first to congratulate them, but I won't say I'm not proud to hold the record. I am.

How do you look back on your time as Plymouth Argyle manager?
Alistair Yates, via Facebook
I thought I did a terrific job down there. I took over a team that was second-bottom of the league and we were relegated that season – I signed one player before the deadline, Kevin Nugent, but he broke his toe. I thought I did a pretty good job of changing the squad around, but we just missed out in the play-offs after missing out on automatic promotion. We scored more goals than any other team in all four divisions – Kevin Nugent, Paul Dalton and Steve Castle, three guys I signed, all scored a lot of goals. But then Paul Dalton broke his leg during pre-season, Steve Castle got yellow jaundice and we bought a player called Peter Swan who didn't really settle in the area and perform. Halfway through the season I agreed with the chairman that I'd leave by mutual consent, because he was someone I just couldn't work for. I had a few problems with gambling at the time, which didn't help, but I thought I did a terrific job. [*FFT*: Did you want to manage again after that?] It was very difficult, because things go around in football. I did try for a couple of jobs but then decided to go off in a different direction. I'd relocated a lot during my career and had problems with gambling that I needed to sort out, although I didn't until I met Steph much later on.

How did it feel when you made your 1,000th league appearance in 1996, at the age of 47?
Barry O'Loughlin, via Facebook
It was great. After Plymouth, I knew I could still play, but not week in, week out over a full season. I wanted to get 1,000 league matches, so I played for Bolton, then moved to Leyton Orient and got to 1,005, which is still a record.

My 1,000th game was for Orient at home to Brighton. I'd said to [Orient chairman] Barry Hearn that I didn't want massive celebrations, but he put a big red carpet out to the centre of the pitch and 1,000 balloons went up! [*Laughs*] I had a presentation from the Football League and the match was on Sky, but Brighton were bottom of the league and I don't think I had much to do. In the game before that, at Fulham, I had a blinder. I always say that the 999th game should have been my 1,000th!

What did you do in your life that allowed you to have such a long playing career?
Joe Edney, via Instagram
I had a bit of luck with injuries, and from a very early age I loved football. I loved training, working hard and being a perfectionist. I was born with quite a lot of ability, and I just carried on as long as I could. But not having injuries helped, though – even today, my knees and joints are pretty solid.

During your 30-year career, who was the best player you played with, and the best you played against?
Chris Drainey, via Facebook
Bobby Moore was the best I played with, because of his stature when I was starting out, and the best striker was Gary Lineker. And the best I played against? Maradona.

'Saved', by Peter and Steph Shilton, is now in shops and online, published by Ad Lib

WEIRD WORLD OF FOOTBALL

MEANWHILE IN...

...Romania, matchday mascots are getting smaller – and they're starting to make mysterious barking noises

1 "I'M ONLY CARRYING THIS DOG IF IT HASN'T GOT WORMS"

If anyone thought Romanian football had gone to the dogs in recent years, this time it really has.

After delivering European champions in 1986 and World Cup quarter-finalists in 1994, the country has had a harder time of late, with a number of clubs hit by cash problems. Dinamo Bucharest, who thrashed Everton 5-1 in 2005, have been among those falling victim to financial woes and finished 12th last term... but they were back in the headlines recently.

Nicknamed the Red Dogs, they emerged for their derby match at FCSB with canines instead of children – finally, mascots that Lorenzo Insigne and N'Golo Kante would be taller than.

The dogs appeared as part of the 'Fill A Gap In Your Life' campaign, encouraging the public to take in strays – each pooch was up for adoption, as well as being dewormed and vaccinated, already putting them ahead of some Premier League footballers.

Thankfully none left a pre-match present, although Dinamo proved capable of creating a mess on the pitch without any canine assistance: FCSB won 6-0.

2 TOP GUN

Hannes Halldorsson was once the keeper who saved a penalty from Lionel Messi – now he's making shoot-'em-up movies.

The Icelander's save was dubiously hailed as 'The Hand of Cod' by Sam Matterface during the 2018 World Cup, but he's turning that hand to filmmaking these days after bringing an end to his international career and releasing the movie *Cop Secret*, starring Audunn Blondal (above).

The flick had its UK premiere at the London Film Festival in early October – thankfully Matterface didn't spoil things for everyone by turning up to yell, 'WHO NEEDS THE GODFATHER? THIS IS THE CODFATHER!' or some other questionable pun.

3 "IS THAT INTERPOL?"

If you're searching for an eccentric club owner, look no further than Ronnie Brunswijk.

The 60-year-old chief of Suriname outfit Inter Moengotapoe is a former guerrilla and bank robber, the nation's current vice president, and is said to have 50 kids – he also played himself upfront in a recent CONCACAF League fixture against Olimpia, wearing the No.61 shirt to match his year of birth.

The Hondurans won 6-0 – unable to play the away leg because he'd be arrested by Interpol as soon as he left the country, Brunswijk dished out cash to Olimpia players as gifts, but that only drew the ire of CONCACAF and both sides were kicked out of the competition. Oopsies...

4 UPPING THE STEAKS

Kevin Keegan is a legend of English football – and he's also a big fan of meat management.

Bafflingly, the ex-England boss was the special guest at September's Meat Management Industry Awards – and he didn't go in there half-hearted.

"Every industry is under scrutiny, but the meat industry has coped with the pandemic very well," Keegan asserted confidently. "It always survives – it keeps reinventing itself," he added, as if it was Madonna or something.

He also confessed to being 'a steak man' – but *FFT* can dismiss rumours that when said steaks arrived, Keegan shouted, 'I will love it if we eat them' before resigning as guest, saying he'd taken the industry as far as it could go.

5 ZOMBIE NATION

LA Galaxy unveiled a statue of club great Landon Donovan ahead of their derby clash with LAFC – but he seemed to have aged about 50 years.

The midfielder represented the MLS side between the ages of 23 and 34, but was honoured with a sculpture looking more like Catherine Tate's Nan, with greying hair, wrinkles across the face and a walking stick presumably just out of shot.

Understandably, some feared that the statue could be the first sign of the apocalypse. "Can we just go back to the old marble statues that don't look like mutant zombies?" one fan asked.

Expect a statue of 150-year-old mutant zombie Zlatan to be unveiled very soon – he'd love that, to be fair.

6 "HI-HO, HI-HO, IT'S INTO THE NET WE GO"

Only 472 people turned up to see Trafford take on Warrington Rylands in the Northern Premier League – but they witnessed some of the weirdest half-time entertainment anyone could ever wish to see.

The match itself was a drab 0-0 draw at the Home Estates Shawe View Stadium, but proceedings were livened up significantly when Snow White darted onto the field at the interval and took a penalty against one of the Seven Dwarfs.

The bizarre scenes were part of a stag party, although Snow White took the spot-kick so confidently that Gareth Southgate is thinking of bringing him on as a late sub if England reach the World Cup final.

7 RESTRICTED VIEW

Uganda's World Cup match with Mali proved a tough watch for TV viewers – after a bloke stood in front of the camera and wouldn't move.

The Cranes were playing one of their first matches since the dismissal of Northern Irish boss Johnny McKinstry, but hopes of following the action from the St Mary's Stadium in Entebbe were hampered early on by a mystery man in a suit and face mask, who placed himself inches from the TV camera for the best part of five minutes, leaving viewers watching the back of his head.

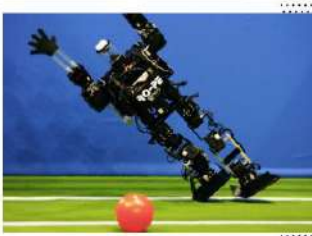
The broadcaster frantically switched to an alternative camera angle while they tried to get him to move – given that the game finished goalless, some viewers may have wished he'd stayed there for the full 90.

8 KING LOUIS RETURNS

Louis van Gaal may be the manager of the Dutch national team now, but that didn't stop him turning up on the bench of a second division club, assisted by a hockey coach.

Van Gaal agreed to come out of retirement to manage his former club Telstar for one match this season, as fans entered a charity raffle to be his number two for the day. A few weeks later he became Netherlands boss for a third time, but the 70-year-old still turned up at Telstar for their fixture against Jong AZ – flanked by the lucky raffle winner Rene van der Spek (right).

The home side promptly triumphed 1-0 in front of 3,000 fans, with Ronald Koeman's son keeping a clean sheet in goal. Well, at least one of the family has had some success this season...



9 "IF I SPEAK, MR ROBOT, I'M IN BIG TROUBLE"

It's official: robots will be better at playing football than actual humans by the year 2050.

That's the prediction of the scientists behind RoboCup, a tournament for robots that's been running for the past 24 years. Their aim is to create a team of automatons that can beat a human XI by the middle of the century – Erling Haaland is pretty much doing it on his own already, to be honest.

A robot defeated Garry Kasparov at chess as far back as 1997, although the Russian responded by accusing IBM of cheating and then demanded a rematch. We await an octogenarian Jose Mourinho's full meltdown when his human side lose to a dubious VAR call in 29 years' time.

NEIGH BOTHER A Deaf Olympics qualifier between Ukraine and Italy had to be halted after a couple of dogs invaded the pitch, swiftly followed by a horse

GAMES THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

RAFA BENITEZ

Valencia 2-1 Espanyol

April 27, 2002 La Liga

"This comeback at home to Espanyol, with two goals from Ruben Baraja, was huge for us. We were down to 10 men from the 30th minute because of Amedeo Carboni's red card, and conceded in the same action. Scoring twice in the second half helped us to win the league in our next game at Malaga, after 31 years of waiting. Those two games built confidence in a group of players that made Mestalla vibrate, and were the culmination of a super season for one of the greatest Valencia teams – we won another title and the UEFA Cup [in 2003-04]. The side felt untouchable thanks to their solidity, balance and ability to compete."

Milan 3-3 Liverpool (2-3 pens)

May 25, 2005 Champions League final

"Istanbul has a privileged place for me. It's the most exciting final in the history of the Champions League, and for what it meant on and off the pitch I'll never be able to forget it. How we got to that final by knocking out Juventus and Chelsea, then coming back against the almighty Milan, are things to be treasured. After the three goals we conceded, there were two things to do at half-time: first, restore the team's hope and confidence; second, make the changes and tactical tweaks that would give credibility to my instructions. Playing with three defenders, increasing the intensity and taking advantage of the pitch's width using our wing-backs helped us to control and win a game that was lost. We wrote one of the most beautiful pages ever written in world football. The union of the players with the fans in the stands was so special that all of us who were there – and even football lovers generally – will remember it as one of the most incredible days."

Liverpool 8-0 Besiktas

November 6, 2007 Champions League

"A record win, with 30 shots on goal and another onto the crossbar. It was an emphatic victory that gave us so much confidence. We still had to defeat Porto and Marseille to reach the last 16, but did it in the best way possible. Yossi Benayoun scored a hat-trick, but Andriy Voronin had a great game. That was the season when Fernando Torres scored 33 goals and Steven Gerrard 21, which showed how much the team was growing."

Benfica 1-2 Chelsea

May 15, 2013 Europa League final

"With everything against us, we won the respect of so many people by working really hard in a professional way. It was Chelsea's first appearance in the final of this competition, our 68th match of the season, and we beat a fantastic Benfica team thanks to a training ground move. In the last minute of injury time, Juan Mata put in a corner, Branislav Ivanovic made a run against Benfica's zonal marking and headed the ball in. To lift the Europa League trophy and finish third in the Premier League was a good season, opening the doors of another successful period for me at Napoli."
Dani Gil

2-0, TO THE ORCHESTRA

Arsenal's 1989 title triumph at Anfield has become a symphony

Few games of football have ever been quite as dramatic as Arsenal's title-clinching win at Liverpool in 1989 – and now it's received the classical treatment.

The Gunners' 2-0 victory at Anfield has been set to music by Mark-Anthony Turnage, with his symphonic piece scheduled to be performed at London's Barbican Centre on November 5.

It must surely have been a dream project for the composer, who's also a Gooner. Turnage! It's up for grabs now! No?

"I batted it away for quite a while," says the 61-year-old, who was previously the composer for the London Philharmonic Orchestra and was awarded a CBE back in 2015. "I thought, 'Ninety minutes, that's a lot of music'. And if you're honest, most of that match is boring, until Alan Smith scores, then the big climax."

Turnage eventually relented, and *Up for Grabs* sounds anything but dull. Named after Brian Moore's famous commentary line, it's a film, concert and livestream showcasing significant moments from the iconic fixture – not the full 90. It will be performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, followed by a Q&A with players.

One novel treat was heading to BBC Salford, to go full *Match of the Day* and pick highlights. "We have footage that's never been shown," declares Turnage. "Stuff in the dressing room at the end – they're not partying the way you see now, with champagne everywhere. Tony Adams is slumped; I think they're all in shock."

Edit done, he had a ball conjuring that score, which features a strong jazz-drummer spine and motifs for individual players. "Even Perry Groves has a tune." There are poignant parts, too. The event is dedicated to the late David Rocastle, with chants weaved in. "I wanted to make it about more than just that match."

Lee Dixon helped to bag the rights from ITV ("his wife works in dance; he's always at the Royal Ballet," says Turnage). In fact, a few old Highbury legends know their arias from their elbows. "Remember Remi Garde? He'd often be at the Festival Hall. A friend of mine was playing at Glyndebourne, he looked out and Tony Adams was sat right in the front row."

That shouldn't seem weird – *Nessun Dorma* helped to change football's image a year after Anfield '89, and classical types are often footy fans. Turnage recalls a premiere in Italy, during the 2006 World Cup, where the key rehearsal clashed with an Azzurri game. "They said no, as all the musicians would either be so angry that they couldn't watch it, or be distracted."

Replica kits are not uncommon sights at UK rehearsals, and hidden West End orchestra pits support sly score-checking. "I've heard stories where people have actually had a match on."

It makes sense to just mix it all together, so how did Turnage score Michael Thomas' fabled strike? "The orchestra goes berserk," confides the composer. "The BBC Symphony Orchestra's principal clarinet is a big Tottenham fan; I hope he's there – I've put in loads of clarinet when that goal goes in."

Turnage! Right at the end!
Si Hawkins

ASK A SILLY QUESTION

JACKIE 'MR WRITER' McNAMARA

The Celtic icon cum sitcom scribe talks tiny dog jumpers, metal detecting and saxophone weaponry

Interview Nick Moore **Illustration** Bill McConkey

Hi Jackie. You've written an excellent new autobiography, and you're also possibly the only footballer ever to pen a sitcom, *The Therapy Room*. Will you do more, and do you own a grand writing desk and a smoking jacket?
Hi. Yes I do like writing, and you never know about doing more. We've filmed a pilot for the sitcom and I enjoy it. I've got plenty more material since being a manager, too. Players love to jump on the afflictions of others. As far as doing it goes, I simply scribble stuff down on a pad, then later it goes on a computer.
You're an analogue, old-school, pen and paper man?
I use a pencil! A pencil and a pad. I've also got a little pen for the iPad which I like, but my handwriting isn't brilliant. I find it all quite therapeutic.
What's your favourite sitcom?
It's a tough one, but you can't look past *Only Fools and Horses*. I still watch it, as it's phenomenal. I loved Grandad, who was in there before Uncle Albert. You've got classic moments like Del Boy falling through the wine bar, but I also loved the hang-gliding episode, plus Rodney on holiday in the Groovy Gang.
You share a birthday with Bill Wyman from The Rolling Stones, who has his own range of metal detectors. Have you ever been detectoring?
I've never done it, but I wouldn't mind giving it a go if there was a good place for it. Imagine going along and finding something really exciting.
Is it just an excuse for middle-aged men to get out of the house?
Yeah, probably. I go fishing and golfing, which amount to the same thing. I like a bit of old-school reeling, but haven't done that for a while. I try to play golf.
Which app wastes most of your time?
I spend far too long on WhatsApp, and I used to play Words With Friends a lot.

"I WALK MY DOG WITH A LITTLE JUMPER ON – IT'S NOT VERY BUTCH"

Your name is an anagram of 'JACK AMERICA MAN'. Would he be a good character for a blockbuster movie? Who would play him?
He's a good one. JACK AMERICA MAN sounds quite hard to me. I reckon the most natural choice would be Robert Downey Jr, from the *Iron Man* movies. He'd do a decent job. I like all the big adventure films and couldn't wait to see the new Bond.
Which actor would star as you in the Jackie McNamara movie?
Martin Compston, perhaps? He's about my size. He's really good in *Line of Duty*, he's a decent footballer and he's a big Celtic supporter.
As a pretty feisty former player and coach, what's the softest thing about Jackie McNamara?
The fact that I walk my dog with a little dog jumper on – I don't feel very butch doing that. I've got a few dog jumpers. We have an Italian greyhound.
What's the wee Italian fella's name?
He's called James.
That's an incredible name for a dog. It's like calling a dog Dave.
Yeah. We've had a little Dachshund one called George as well. We gave our kids the weird names and the dogs get the sensible ones.
Could you beat Andy Murray at tennis if he'd had a couple of pints of Stella, was injured and had to use a frying pan as a racket?
That wouldn't be enough – my tennis isn't very good at all. My mate used to hammer me. He's a one-off, Murray.
What's the best game at the funfair?
The one where you have to throw the hoops over prizes.
Which musical instrument is the best weapon? Would you pick something heavy like a guitar, or could you do more damage with a stabby bassoon?
I think you need a balance, so maybe a saxophone. You could hurt someone with that – a good whack on the head.
Good choice, thanks for chatting.
No problem.

Jackie's book, 'His Name Is McNamara', is available now via Pitch Publishing

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RANKED

25 BEST TELEVISION COMMENTATORS IN BRITISH HISTORY

The first live televised football match was shown on British TV back in 1946 – *FFT* assesses the masterful mic men who've called games in the 75 years since

25 DARREN FLETCHER
24 TONY GUBBA
23 DEREK RAE
22 GERALD SINSTADT
21 IAN GWYN HUGHES
20 HUGH JOHNS
19 STEVE WILSON
18 ALAN PARRY
17 ROB PALMER
16 ROB HAWTHORNE
15 PETER BRACKLEY
14 GUY MOWBRAY
13 IAN CROCKER
12 JONATHAN PEARCE
11 ARCHIE MACPHERSON
10 IAN DARKE
9 JON CHAMPION
8 DAVID COLEMAN
7 PETER DRURY
6 MARTIN TYLER
5 JOHN MOTSON
4 CLIVE TYLDESLEY
3 KENNETH WOLSTENHOLME
2 BRIAN MOORE

1 BARRY DAVIES

In the long line of commentators on British TV, no one has quite had the same mastery of the English language as Barry Davies.

A regular on screens for 38 years, he had a way of making his remarks sound poetic amid a maelstrom of action. "I just opened my mouth and hoped that my foot was sufficiently far away," he told *FFT* with typical modesty in 2020.

Davies' life could have turned out differently – he'd planned to become a doctor before reading dentistry at university, only to be sidetracked.

He began his new career during national service in West Germany, joining BBC Radio in 1963, then ITV for the '66 World Cup – calling North Korea's shock 1-0 victory over Italy.

He switched back to the Beeb in 1969, before commentating on nine World Cups and seven Euros over the next three and a half decades. Davies provided the proclamations to such moments as Diego Maradona's solo goal against England in 1986 ("You have to say that's magnificent"), the "Brolin, Dahlin, Brolin!" demolition of Graham Taylor's side in '92, then the Three Lions' loss to Germany in '96. "Oh no..." was all it needed as Gareth Southgate saw his spot-kick saved.

There were more excitable hours – "Look at his face!" when a delighted Francis Lee scored for Derby against Manchester City in 1974 – but Davies was a king of calm understatement.

After leaving *Match of the Day* in 2004, he commentated on a range of other sports and even the World Stare-Out Championship on sketch show *Big Train*, ahead of a football comeback in 2014 – working with Hacker T. Dog for CBBC, then making one last *MOTD* appearance on the programme's 50th anniversary. His words were still as majestic as ever.

DRIVING AMBITION Southern League outfit Frome Town were forced to cancel a prize draw for a car, after one person entered 2,001 times

RANDOM CLUB PROFILE

SHERIFF TIRASPOL

Pre-pandemic, Real Madrid's KGB conquerors had an average gate of just 929

In 2019, Sheriff Tiraspol lost 3-0 at home to Saburtalo Tbilisi in the Champions League's first qualifying round. Two years later, they were triumphing at the Bernabeu.

The first Moldovan club ever to appear in the Champions League group stage have a curious story – not least because they don't consider themselves Moldovan. Instead, Tiraspol is the capital of Transnistria, a sliver of land 250 miles long but only 15 miles wide by its eastern border with Ukraine.

The region fought a war of independence with Moldova after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 – backed by Russian forces, it established itself as a breakaway state, albeit one that isn't recognised internationally. Transnistria is the only state in the world to have a hammer and sickle on its flag, and has been dubbed "a black hole of organised crime".

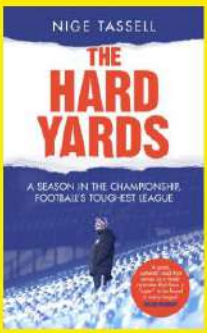
In 1997, two former KGB officers founded Sheriff Tiraspol, named after their emerging Sheriff company which today owns petrol stations, supermarkets and a mobile phone network. With Transnistrian clubs remaining in the Moldovan league system, the new Sheriff in town went from the third tier to being domestic champions in five years.

It was part of a pattern across Eastern Europe since the fall of Communism, as regional clubs with new money – see Shakhtar (Ukraine), Zenit (Russia), BATE (Belarus), Ludogorets (Bulgaria) and Cluj (Romania) – ousted capital city giants.

Sheriff have had a stranglehold ever since – they've won 19 of the last 21 titles, but only had four Europa League group campaigns to show for it, and lost home and away to Spurs in 2013. Crowds dipped to an average of just 929 in 2019 – but their European fortunes have changed dramatically. Beginning their Champions League campaign in the first qualifying round again, on the night England beat Denmark at Euro 2020, Sheriff progressed past Teuta, Alashkert, Red Star Belgrade and Dinamo Zagreb to reach the group stage. There they shocked Shakhtar, then gave *El Chiringuito* a month's worth of content by beating a Real Madrid side containing Eden Hazard. Their own team was exclusively made up of foreigners – Sheriff's goalscorers hailed from Uzbekistan and Luxembourg, while their key man was Greek goalkeeper Giorgos Athanasiadis (below). It put Sheriff top of a group that also includes Italian giants Inter.

When Madrid visit in November, the crowd might be a little bit higher than 929...

REQUIRED READING



THE HARD YARDS
Nige Tassell
(Simon & Schuster, £16.99)
●●●●●

With a cast of fallen giants, parachute-assisted sides from above and some new hopefuls, it's hardly surprising that the 2020-21 Championship season was as dramatic and insanely competitive as ever.

Throw in the fact that games were played in largely empty stadiums – though enterprising Millwall fans bent the rules by booking rooms at the Holiday Inn which overlook the pitch at Carrow Road – and the financial pressures on already-strained clubs were never higher.

This textured book delves into a rough-and-tumble division described by Norwich manager Daniel Farke as "the toughest in the world". Through interviews with key figures, Tassell paints a fascinating picture of life at ailing Sheffield Wednesday, Wayne Rooney's Derby as they battle a transfer embargo, Wycombe under affable leader Gareth Ainsworth and Cardiff, where Tassell learns that Mick McCarthy has lost none of his bite in the coarsest Anglo Saxon.

It's a fascinating testimony not only to a ruthless league, but also to the far-reaching impact of the pandemic.
Jon Spurling

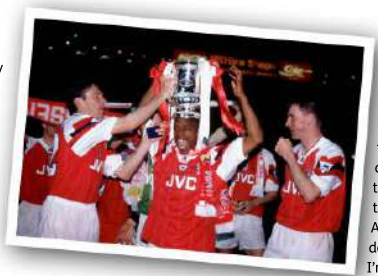
"SHE'S NOT WORTH IT!" In Argentina, a women's game between Godoy Cruz and Las Pumas stopped after punches and hair-pulling led to a mass brawl

MY FOOTBALL

ROB BECKETT
ARSENAL

The TV funnyman chats getting the hump with Wrighty, why football should definitely be more like ice hockey – and what makes going to matches a waste of time...

What was the first game you ever attended?
Tottenham vs Arsenal in the early '90s – it was 0-0 and there were loads of fights. We were south London – I should be a Palace fan, really. But I just loved Ian Wright, so I started watching Arsenal. I'm an Ian Wright fan first and an Arsenal fan second. I feel quite guilty – I mean, I did have a season ticket for a few years, but I feel semi-ashamed because I should be Palace or Millwall. I don't get too upset about it like other fans either – give me 10 minutes after a defeat and I don't care. You can't get in trouble for switching to a worse team, can you?



Is Wrighty your favourite footballer ever, then?
Always! He was from near me in south London – he looked like he enjoyed it whenever he played; he was a bit dirty and would have a fight. He'd kick Peter Schmeichel and I loved all that – like when Martin Keown smacked Ruud van Nistelrooy on the head. I reckon I should have watched boxing instead really, because I hate it when people say that having a scrap in football is disrespectful and it's such a shame – no, it's f**king brilliant. I'd love for football to be a bit more like ice hockey: imagine how good it would be if Roy Keane and Patrick Vieira could just have a two-minute scrap and have it out properly.

Have you got to meet many of your footballing heroes?
Well, I got to meet Wrighty when I did a radio show, and I was crap because I was so nervous. Then I saw him in the street. He just shouted, "Oi, what's happening?" and gave me a cuddle. I was like, 'Oh my god, he knows who I am!' Then I started working with him on Absolute Radio and it's so weird: they say don't meet your heroes, but it should be 'don't meet your heroes unless your hero is Ian Wright'. Definitely meet him – he's more than you can ever imagine. It was quite funny, because I'd start to get annoyed with him whenever he turned up late. I'd be sat there thinking, 'For f**k's sake, mate'. A few years ago, I'd have been desperate to meet him, and now I'm getting the hump because he's turning up to work late. But he's a lovely bloke. I was at a hotel with my wife once for our anniversary, and Wrighty was there with his wife. He sent us over a bottle of champagne when my wife didn't actually get me anything that year. I got an anniversary present from Ian Wright instead of my wife...

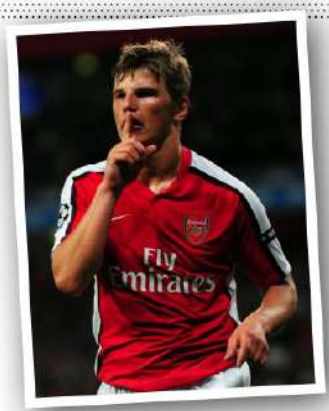
Do you get to Arsenal much?
Nah, I had to give up my season ticket. Between having kids and touring, I very rarely go. I see those guys who sing "over land and sea" and think, 'What the f**k's happening in your home life?' You know that lot? It's a waste of life, I've got to be honest. I think you can be too committed as a fan – you really need a balance in your life.

What's the greatest goal you've ever seen live?
I saw Aki Riihilahti score from about 35 yards for Palace, and was directly behind it. I must have been young, but I saw it bend – it wasn't the best goal ever, but position-wise I couldn't have been any better. It probably wasn't even that good, but in my head it was unbelievable. It was the first proper long-range goal I'd seen!

What's the funniest thing you've ever seen or heard at a game?
Lloyd Griffith [fellow comedian, once of these pages] dropping his phone into a toilet at half-time during the Euros final at Wembley. You know when something happens and you just explode?

Who's the one footballer you'd love to take on a night out?
I bumped into Paul Robinson while on a massive bender in Edinburgh, when he played for Blackburn. He came out on the piss – I'm not sure if he's calmed down, though. He just came to see my show up there. He once got smuggled into Arsenal for a meeting with Arsene Wenger apparently, but Wenger didn't want him and signed Richard Wright instead. Great decision. There's Jimmy Bullard, too – he's brilliant but he can be too much. So it just depends on how big this night out is going to be. But someone I've not been out with is Jack Grealish. I'd love to have a drink with him, because everyone loves Jack Grealish now, don't they? Phil Foden is great too, and I love Emile Smith Rowe and Bukayo Saka, but they're only kids. You need someone who's had a bit of a life – you know, some headcase from the Championship. But no, I'd do laughing gas with Grealish.

Which player would you choose as your room-mate?
Someone really little, I'd imagine. Andrey Arshavin – really small, really quiet. Would probably rather be in Russia. The smallest player who's ever played football, I'd say.



Which player do you like even though they never played for your club?
That's two-fold. We could have had someone like [Didier] Drogba upfront with Thierry Henry. But do I want to weaken another team or just make Arsenal great? I'm overthinking this now! I think either Ronaldinho or fat Ronaldo. It's awful that he's just become 'fat Ronaldo' now, isn't it?

Who from your club's past would you bring back for the current side?
At their peak? In this team it has to be a centre-back or defensive midfielder, so if I could have a young Tony Adams coming through at 20 now, and you know you're getting 15-20 years of him at the back, that would be great. I'd say either Adams or Patrick Vieira. We're all right with our attackers at the moment, but we need a leader to help us out a bit.

Who's your current favourite player?
I really like Smith Rowe. I think he's brilliant – especially after the North London Derby [where he scored one, assisted one and won the man of the match award].

If you could drop yourself into your all-time five-a-side team, who would you be playing alongside?
I've got to go with David Seaman in goal. There may be better goalkeepers, but he's so lovely – you've got to think about morale. I'd have Patrick Vieira in the middle. Thierry Henry upfront, of course. And then... f**k it, I'll go Dennis Bergkamp as well. Just because then I'll really enjoy it – I'll just be playing with a load of club legends. But then I've not got Ian Wright, have I? Right, get rid of Henry and stick Wrighty in there for the banter. I'll just stay at the back with Dave...
Mark White

'A Class Act' by Rob Beckett, priced at £20 (HarperCollins), is available now

SING WHEN YOU'RE KEEPING

A second-tier shot-stopper is set to represent Belgium at Eurovision

Life is pretty good for Jeremie Makiese right now. Last month, the goalkeeper got the big break he was waiting for by joining Excelsior Virton in the Belgian second division. Four days later, he was chosen to sing at the Eurovision Song Contest.

If it seems like Belgium randomly went around second-tier football clubs, asking if any goalies fancied crooning for a continental audience of 200 million people, sadly that's not the case – don't get your hopes up Sam Johnstone, that call to sing for the UK might not be coming your way. Makiese is already an accomplished singer, having won the *Voice Belgique* in April thanks to rousing renditions of Labrinth's *Jealous* and planet-saving monster ditty *Earth Song*, by fellow glove-wearer Michael Jackson.

The 21-year-old started to make real progress in music after injury put his football career on hold. Hailing from a musical family, Makiese was originally banned from playing football by his father, only to join BX Brussels – a lower-league club now owned by Vincent Kompany – when he was 12. "My dad didn't want me to sign, so I waited until he left on a trip – I needed the approval of an adult, so a family friend pretended to be a relative," he explained.

By 2019, he'd moved on to Athletic Club Jeunesse Molenbeek, but a dislocated elbow soon sidelined him for several months. The pandemic didn't make his comeback easier – he spent time with Walhain before a summer trial at La Louviere Centre, when his *Voice* victory had propelled him to celebrity status. A deal sadly didn't come to fruition there, but then an opportunity emerged with Virton, who were looking for players after a chaotic 18 months. They had sat second in the second tier in March 2020 – booking them a place in the country's 16-team play-off for a Europa League spot – before COVID hit, the season was halted and the club were demoted two divisions because of financial problems.

Virton couldn't get a team together for the fourth tier last season, forfeiting matches 5-0 while battling in court to overturn their demotion – a battle they won, ensuring they returned to the second division for the current campaign. Thus followed a dash to assemble a squad – weeks ahead of their first game, they had only two players.

Makiese was signed as a back-up goalkeeper rather than an expected starter, but will spend the next few months trying to force his way into contention – all while formulating a song for Eurovision, which takes place in May.

"In music we're quite flexible – I'll just adapt my schedule," he insisted. "At first, I had a preference for football – I preferred to be nicknamed Courtois or Casillas rather than Michael Jackson. Now, it's 50/50. I want to show that you can combine the two."

He'll be bidding to secure Belgium's first Eurovision victory since 1986 – if he can incorporate a couple of diving saves and a Higuita-style scorpion kick into his stage performance, the trophy will surely be his.
Chris Flanagan

VISIT THE HOME OF THE FOOTBALL QUIZ
fourfourtwo.com/quiz

THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

Do you know your Ballon d'Or winners from your Golden Shoe greats? Well, it's about time we found out...

01 Tottenham strike legend Jimmy Greaves played for one overseas club in his 14-year professional career. Who were they?

02 Host nation England will launch their Women's Euros campaign next summer at which ground?

03 Which boss ended the 2007-08 season as Derby boss when the Rams posted a Premier League low of 11 points?

04 Brentford plucked their former wideman Said Benrahma from which French side for a bargain £2.7 million in 2018?

05 Who were Scotland supposed to be facing when they kicked off against no one in a famous 1998 World Cup qualifier?

06 Who was awarded the inaugural Ballon d'Or, presented by *France Football* magazine in 1956?

07 At the start of October, six teams in the National League averaged crowds above 5,000 this season. Can you name them?

08 Who were the last outfit outside England, Spain, Germany, Italy or France to make it all the way to a Champions League final?

09 James Rodriguez left Everton in September. Which country is he now playing in?

10

These four marksmen can all call themselves winners of the European Golden Shoe. Can you tell us who they are?

11 Jarred Gillett recently became the Premier League's first ever foreign referee. Where is he from?

12 Four Welshmen have picked up the PFA Players' Player of the Year prize. Who are they?

13 Identify the ex-England players from their 'alternative' places of birth listed below.

Australia
Guernsey
Ivory Coast
Jersey
Nigeria
Sierra Leone
Singapore
Wales

14 Who is the Championship's most expensive player of all time, after joining for £15.8m in 2017?

15 Which talisman bagged a 150th goal for his club in September, in his 250th Premier League game?

16 "Shouldn't you be at work?" were Des Lynam's iconic words before which England match?

17 Rangers forward Alfredo Morelos played in which country ahead of his switch to Scotland?

18 Which former Football League defender is the current manager of Northern Ireland?

1. Milan **2.** Old Trafford **3.** Paul Jewell **4.** Nice **5.** Estonia **6.** Stanley Matthews **7.** Chesterfield, Grimsby, Notts County, Southend, Stockport, Wrexham **8.** Porto (2004) **9.** Qatar **10.** Mario Jardel (Sporting), Hugo Sanchez (Real Madrid), Luca Toni (Fiorentina), Roy Makaay (Deportivo) **11.** Australia **12.** Ian Rush, Mark Hughes, Ryan Giggs, Gareth Bale **13.** Tony Dorigo (or Arthur Savage), Matt Le Tissier, Wilfried Zaha, Graeme Le Saux, John Salako, Nathaniel Chalobah, Terry Butcher (or Basil Patchitt), Rob Jones (or Frederick Green) **14.** Ruben Neves (Wolves) **15.** Jamie Vardy **16.** England vs Tunisia, 1998 World Cup **17.** Finland **18.** Ian Baraclough

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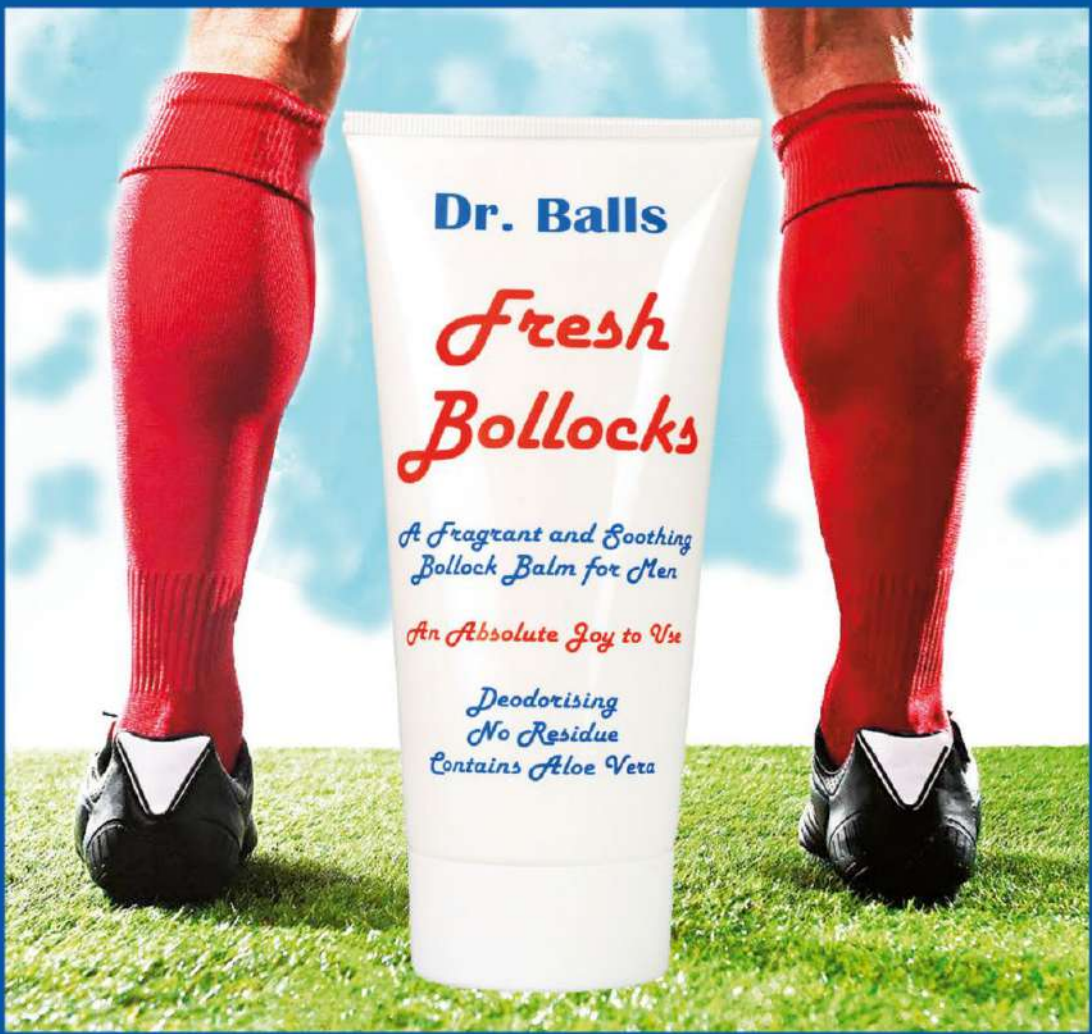
who care about their personal hygiene



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INTERVIEW

NONI MADUEKE

After leaving Tottenham and resisting Manchester United's advances, the 19-year-old Londoner is now starting to flourish as a wideman with PSV

You've been at PSV Eindhoven for more than three years now. What have been your highlights so far?
Making my debut when I was 17 was great, because it felt like all the hard work had paid off. When I was young, I wanted to make my debut at 17 – I set myself that target. My first goal at the start of last season, and my two against Ajax in the Super Cup this year, have also been highlights.

PSV rewarded your rapid progress by handing you the No.10 shirt this season. How did that make you feel?
It's the shirt that the greatest players always wear, and that's what I strive to be every day. I wore that number in the youth team as well, so it's an important shirt for me and I'm really grateful that I can wear it.

You grew up in north London, then joined Crystal Palace's academy. How did they scout you?
I was playing for my local team, then there was a tournament at the end of the season when a Crystal Palace scout came to watch me. He told me I should come and have a trial with them, which I did. I think I was there for maybe a week, then they signed me to their under-10s. From then I was travelling to the club every day with my dad, who drove. I stayed at Palace until I was 12.

Then you joined Tottenham...
They showed an interest in me, and I went to Spurs for two or three weeks before they signed me. I stayed there for four years – I was 16 when I left. They offered me a new contract to stay, but I turned it down and moved to PSV in June 2018.

Why the Netherlands?
I was keen to play for a first team as quickly as possible, so I just used my brain and thought, 'Where can I go and play early, but still play at a high level?' That was PSV. There were a lot of teams from abroad interested, as well as teams in England, but in the end PSV was the right decision. They told me that if you're good enough, you're old enough and then you'll play.

Did they tell you about the many top players PSV have developed?
I already knew about the great players that have been here before, like Arjen Robben, Ruud van Nistelrooy, Luc Nilis, Ronaldo, Romario and Memphis Depay. These are great forwards who played here and also played at the highest level, so that was more motivation for me to come here.

One of the other teams which tried to sign you were Manchester United, the club you supported as a boy. Did you consider joining them?
Yeah, I did travel up to Manchester to look at their facilities. I took part in a couple of training sessions and even played in a trial match, I think against Middlesbrough if I remember it well. That was cool, and I also trained with Mason Greenwood there. Carrington was really nice and it was a difficult decision not to join United, but I think it turned out pretty well. You're always going to have some doubts, but I knew the best move for my career was PSV, even if playing for Manchester United was the dream.

How did your adaptation go when you moved to the Netherlands?
It wasn't too difficult. Everyone speaks English here, so it was easy for me to communicate, and I had my mum and sister here at the beginning. Now I live by myself, but my family come over to see me when they can.

When you played for PSV Under-19s, Ruud van Nistelrooy was the coach. What was that like?
That was really nice. He was a great player, and he's a good coach as well. He taught me several things I use in my game now. He encouraged me to simplify the game, with things like

DUEL When Exeter faced Walsall, both bosses were called Matt Taylor – the first clash of EFL managerial namesakes since Bobby Campbells tussled in 1978

crossing, shooting and dribbling. It was just making the game easy, giving me clear options about what I have to do when I'm in the final third of the pitch. Two seasons ago I went on a training camp with the first team, and he told me that he didn't want to see me again in the under-19s, in a positive way to stimulate me to stay in the first team. He said he was letting me go because he believed I'd be able to stay there – and he was right.

That meant you didn't get to play for PSV U21s very much...
Yeah, I only played a few games with them. They always told me that the better players skip the U21s, as they go straight from the U19s to the first team – that was always the plan for me. From the U19s, I went straight to training with the first team every day.

You extended your deal in August, after being linked with a number of clubs including your old team Spurs, Manchester United again, Borussia Dortmund and Real Madrid. Did you consider moving?
There were some clubs interested and I could have moved this summer, but I felt it wasn't the right time. I always knew I was going to stay here.

You made your debut for England U21s in March, and recently made the 40-name shortlist for the Golden Boy award, for the best young player in the world. How much do honours like that mean to you?
It was nice to be shortlisted for such a prestigious award, to be recognised for what you're doing, and it's been great to play for England. It's always good to play for your country – when you play for England U21s, it means you're a decent player. It was great to reunite there with Oliver Skipp, who I played with in Tottenham's academy.

What are your goals for this season?
I want to win as many things as I can with PSV, like the league and cup, and if possible the Europa League. We've already won the Super Cup. Personally, I just want to keep improving – at the end of the season, I want to be a far better player than I was at the start of the campaign. I can dribble and score, but I want to make every element of my game better.
Arthur Renard

@FOURFOURTWO ASKS...

WHAT'S THE ONE FOOTBALL PREDICTION YOU GOT HORRIBLY WRONG...?

Cristiano Ronaldo was a stepover-obsessed showpony who would never amount to anything. I still cling desperately to the fact that between 2003 and 2006, I was broadly right... ***@notrashcougar***

North Korea would get out of their group with Brazil, Portugal and Ivory Coast at the 2010 World Cup. ***@michaelcoxon***

With Chelsea leading Barcelona 1-0 in the 2009 Champions League semi-final second leg, I declared that Andres Iniesta was a big-game bottler. ***@jamiesword86***

When [Man] City signed Tevez, I said, 'I don't see the point. He's not fast, he's not clinical'. I think I compared him to a slightly better Paul Dickov – he'd work hard and score the odd goal. He was absolutely incredible! ***@kippaxtrev83***

Josh McEachran [right] would become a Xavi-like superstar for Chelsea and England, winning 100 caps and single-handedly transforming the national team's style of play. ***@bigrichinnes***

Supermac will get double figures for Newcastle against Hereford. ***@davyseddon***

How was I supposed to know that Frank de Boer wasn't going to take Palace to the next level? He'd managed Ajax and Inter! ***@neilkay1979***

I said Kevin De Bruyne would flop at City and be sent on loan to Roma within six months. ***@commutermisery***

In my national newspaper column at the beginning of the 2007-08 season, I declared that football was so predictable that I'd lead a naked conga through Soho Square if none of the Big Four reached the FA Cup final. Unhelpfully, Cardiff played Portsmouth... ***@vinerbrian***

I predicted that Bosko Balaban would be a goalscoring sensation for Aston Villa. ***@Finaldo***

Paul Jewell would sort Derby out, and we'd at least go down fighting. ***@Maybot_8000***

In 2003, I predicted that David Bellion would win the Ballon d'Or within five years. ***@joerawlings7***

With Newcastle 3-1 down against Leicester in 1996-97, I walked out of my mate's house, saying, 'This one is all over'. When I got home, Shearer had scored a hat-trick. ***@IanHunt75470890***

✱ STAR TWEET

In 1990, a Swansea-supporting friend put £10,000 on Liverpool to beat them in an FA Cup tie. Not only did it end 0-0, Swansea lost the replay 8-0! ***@7puzzle***

WIN! T-shirt of choice for Star Tweet and A4 print of choice for Spine Line, courtesy of Art of Football

331 SPINE LINE: **"'Kilmarnock 2-2 Real Madrid'** was Ferenc Puskas' last European Cup game aged 38, mentioned in the article about his diaries," says Greg Watcham. Oh yes, he's done it! #FFTSpineLine

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THE BILLION EURO DROP

Even Lionel Messi, reunited with old Barcelona pal Neymar, was caught out by his summer switch to Paris Saint-Germain. But with Kylian Mbappe eyeing personal glory (and a premature exit), are MNM a match made in heaven or an indulgence destined to fail?

Words Chris Flanagan
Additional reporting Felipe Rocha, Dani Gil, Nicolas Puiravau

When you can put a shark in a bathtub, you can pretty much achieve anything.

The best player of his generation had teamed up with the star of one of the world's greatest national teams, and an awesome goalscorer in his prime, thanks to the biggest spending spree in history. In one of the globe's most famous cities, the triumvirate had just one season to deliver, before their much-hyped partnership was scheduled to come to an end.

Before Lionel Messi, Neymar and Kylian Mbappe, came Pele, Franz Beckenbauer and Giorgio Chinaglia at the New York Cosmos. United by the finances of Steve Ross, chief of Warner Communications, they faced sky-high expectations, as they attempted to win the North American Soccer League in their one and only campaign together before Pele hung up his boots at the end of 1977.

"It mostly meshed, occasionally jammed, but when it worked it really was a thing of beauty," was how one team-mate described the combination. The Cosmos lost 11 of 26 matches during the regular season, but they eventually succeeded in style. Bonded by off-field japes that included Beckenbauer stuffing grasshoppers into players' socks, and Pele smuggling a small shark into a bath at the team hotel, they went on to win six out of six in the play-offs, cruising to an 8-3 victory over the Fort Lauderdale Strikers – formerly the league's best defence – en route. Sure, the Cosmos effectively bought the title, but it created a spectacle that's still talked about 44 years later.

Now, during 2021-22, Messi, Neymar and Mbappe are aiming to link up and achieve a similar feat – possibly without deploying any finned sea creatures. The world may never grow to love Paris Saint-Germain, but after a total financial outlay of approximately €1 billion on just three players, their fabled strikeforce has an opportunity to write this season's biggest story, in what could be their one and only year together.

On paper, their career accolades already make them one of the finest trios the game has ever witnessed. If they find harmony on the pitch, Champions League glory could be theirs. But that's a big 'if'...

WHAT OLYMPICS?

Just as a semi-retired Pele's 1975 move to the Cosmos was hailed as one of the most sensational deals in football history, so too was Messi's to the Parc des Princes. PSG had been heavily linked with the Argentine a year earlier, when he made an ill-fated attempt to force his way out of Barcelona armed only with his trusty burofax. But not even Les Parisiens themselves believed there was a realistic chance of snapping up the Flea this summer.

On August 4, the 34-year-old was pictured on holiday in Ibiza with former Barcelona pal Neymar, compatriots Angel Di Maria and Leandro Paredes, plus fellow PSG man Marco Verratti. He had no idea that all four were to become team-mates six days later.

"When I saw the photo of Messi with the PSG players in Ibiza, I called one of them and said, 'Bring Messi to Paris!'" smiles Luis Ferrer, formerly a key part of the Ligue 1 behemoth's recruitment department. "But they replied saying it was too late – he was going back to Barcelona to sign his new contract."

Within 24 hours, though, Barça's stunning U-turn changed everything, and the wheels were set in motion for a week that few in Paris will ever forget. That week, the city was already due to become the official sporting capital of the world, in a handover ceremony to mark the end of the Tokyo Olympics and begin the build-up to Paris 2024. When the ceremony finally happened, it wasn't even the biggest story in France.

"That week, from Monday to Friday, we had five front pages with a picture of Messi," chuckles *L'Equipe* journalist Pierre-Etienne Minonzio. "Maybe that had never happened before in the entire history of *L'Equipe*, to speak about the same guy five days in a row. Before that week, no one expected the deal at all. It almost didn't feel real. When Leo played his first game and greeted the fans by showing them the PSG badge on his shirt, you thought, 'What is happening?!'

"If you look at the history of the French league, it has never had such a huge player in his prime. With Messi, Neymar and Mbappe upfront, there's a feeling that you have to

Above "I'm ready for this, so darling hold my hand"

watch all of their games this season. In the history of football, maybe you'll never see so many talents in one team."

The trio's first appearance together at the Parc des Princes came on Messi's home bow against Lyon in September, on an evening when a club legend returned to the capital and took the ceremonial kick-off.

"I wished the three of them the best of luck – the excitement and the commotion inside the stadium was incredible," smiles former Brazil midfielder Rai, who helped PSG to land their only major European silverware to date, the 1996 Cup Winners' Cup.

"It was just a lovely coincidence that I was there – last year, I was voted as the fans' favourite player in PSG history, so got invited. It's incredibly pleasing to see Messi in a PSG shirt – when he signed, my first thought was, 'What wonderful craziness'. PSG already had a very competitive squad before the summer, and their results in Europe have proved that. Imagine it now with Messi."

MSN MESSENGERS

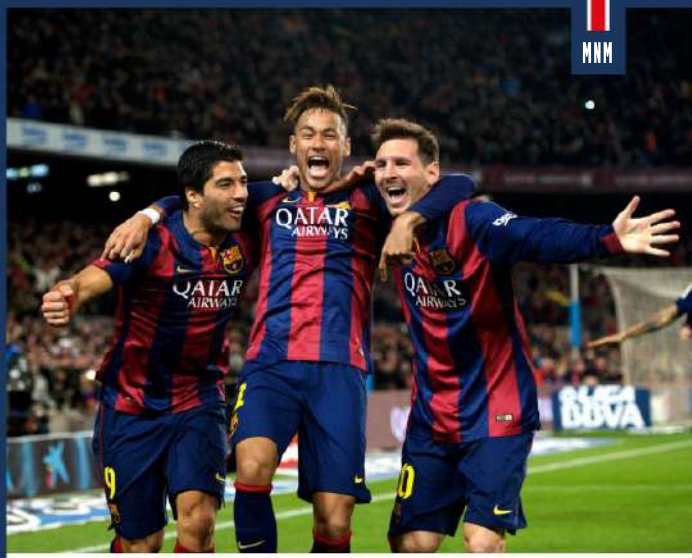
Some call it Epiphany, but in Spain they call it *El Dia de Reyes* – Three Kings Day. On the 12th night of Christmas, children polish their shoes and leave them ready and waiting for the kings to arrive and put presents in them. It's a tradition that harks back to the birth of Jesus, and the Three Kings (or Three Wise Men) who visited Bethlehem bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh. It's a bigger deal than even Christmas Day.

On January 5, 2015, the celebrations were in full swing at Barcelona's Mini Estadi, a few hundred yards from the Camp Nou, at an open training session to mark the festivities. Children packed the stands ready to welcome three new kings, but one of them didn't show up. Lionel Messi was nowhere to be seen – and his manager was furious.

If Messi, Neymar and Mbappe exist today as a combination, it's because of the success that Messi and Neymar enjoyed in Catalonia, together with Luis Suarez. The trio bagged an incredible 364 goals in just three seasons, and are widely regarded as one of the most effective front threes in history.

But that day in 2015, things were on the brink of collapse before they'd really started. MSN had begun with defeats to Real Madrid and Celta Vigo in their opening two matches together, and Suarez's first Blaugrana season had produced just a single league goal by the time they travelled to David Moyes' Real Sociedad at the turn of the year. Surprisingly, Luis Enrique rested both Messi and Neymar from his starting line-up, and Barça lost 1-0. Angered at his omission, Messi never arrived for the open training session a day later. In the same week, he started following Chelsea on Instagram, sparking speculation about his future at the Camp Nou.

The Argentine claimed his absence was due to gastroenteritis, but Enrique regarded it as a rather convenient excuse. In his first campaign as Barcelona boss, he was ready to hit his star man with a hefty fine, until Xavi prompted a different sort of epiphany.



Above "Smile? That's an extra €10,000 a week" **Top** MSN each scored to sink Atletico in 2015

"WHEN MESSI SIGNED, MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS, 'WHAT WONDERFUL CRAZINESS'. JUST IMAGINE THAT SQUAD... NOW WITH MESSI"

"The first half of that season was so s**t," remembers Ivan San Antonio, writer for the Barcelona-based newspaper *Sport*. "Nobody thinks about it now, but there were some really ugly results, then the crisis when Messi didn't go to that event for the children. Luis Enrique wanted to punish Messi, but Xavi stepped in and said, 'Luis, don't do it, Messi can't be punished – if you want to win, you have to take care of him, then he will answer with goals, assists and titles'."

The coach finally relented. The following weekend, Barcelona hosted Atletico Madrid where Neymar, Suarez and Messi all scored in a 3-1 triumph, racing off to celebrate the third goal together with unbridled happiness. The photograph became iconic, and Barça never looked back. By the end of the season

"KYLIAN'S PARENTS JOKED THAT I SLEPT IN A TENT NEXT DOOR TO THEIR HOUSE. THE SPORTING PROJECT MADE THE DIFFERENCE"

they'd won La Liga, the Copa del Rey and the Champions League, defeating Manchester City, PSG, Pep Guardiola's Bayern Munich, then Juventus in the Berlin final.

The lethal front three were at the heart of everything, having established a rapport on and off the pitch. "When Suarez arrived, he became really close with Messi, then Neymar thought, 'OK, these guys are the kings, so I have to be close to them too'," recalls San Antonio. "It was in Neymar's interest to do it, but it became a real relationship and that always helps players on the pitch. Watching them, you could feel how close they were.

"Barça have always had incredibly good strikers, but those three were the best we've ever seen. Luis Enrique didn't know how to manage them in the first half of the season – he liked to make changes in every game, but eventually realised that those three had to play, always. When he did it, the other players said, 'OK, you guys score all the goals and we'll work for you'. Neymar did defend without the ball, and Suarez always pressed, but they did it at a lower level compared with the rest. It was like two teams – the team who defended, and the team who worked in another way to become stars."

Messi, Suarez and Neymar plundered 122 goals together that season, then upped it to 131 in 2015-16 as Barcelona won La Liga once again. "They had an unprecedented ability to score so many goals and never feel satisfied with a result," former Barça striker Javier Saviola tells *FFT*. "All three were in the prime of their careers, with a very high level of understanding. We all admired that trident. They'll go down in history."

Neymar had already voiced his desire to play alongside Messi long before his arrival at Barcelona. "I think we could be an excellent partnership," he'd said as a 19-year-old at Santos, months before facing the Argentine in the 2011 Club World Cup Final.

Above "My car's already got its steering wheel" **Top** Neymar broke the world transfer record in August 2017

"Neymar was very ambitious and wanted to become the best player in the world, so he thought the best way to do it was playing with Messi," says San Antonio. "Then he did it and enjoyed it, because it made him play even better. But eventually at Barcelona, he realised he could never be the best player in the world if he was playing *with* Messi. So he decided to leave."

It seemed unthinkable that anyone would walk away from one of the greatest strike combinations in history but Neymar knew, despite his near-constant improvements, Messi would always be top dog at the Camp Nou. Barcelona were also starting to falter – Real Madrid wrestled back the league title in 2016-17, while Barça's Champions League campaign was wildly inconsistent.

There was a feeling that the side's intensity had dropped, encapsulated by the way Messi stood still and watched after losing the ball for PSG's second goal in a 4-0 quarter-final first-leg annihilation at the Parc des Princes. Jolted into action, Barcelona responded in the Camp Nou return – with two minutes of normal time remaining, Neymar scored twice and then assisted Sergi Roberto as the Blaugrana improbably prevailed 6-1. It's the club's ultimate *remontada* (comeback), but it had seismic consequences.

The win was expected to kick-start another charge to Champions League success, but it didn't – Barça lost 3-0 at Juventus in the first leg of the next round, and this time couldn't recover in Spain. PSG, humiliated and hurt, were ready to make their move.

'CAN I TEMPT YOU WITH A CROISSANT?'

If you can't beat them, sign them. That was PSG's approach during the summer of 2017, after a season of crushing disappointment. Unable to get past the quarter-finals of the Champions League since their Qatari takeover six years earlier, they had somehow lost the Ligue 1 title too – finishing second to Monaco, despite winning the league by a startling 31-point margin the previous campaign. Their answer? To move for the man who had destroyed them at the Camp Nou, then steal Monaco's rising star.

"Neymar's transfer was decided upon the arrival of Antero Henrique – he put in place a plan to take PSG to a new dimension," says Ferrer, of the club's then sporting director. "We went back in for Mbappe, but we had already tried to get him before he signed his first professional contract with Monaco and had remained in touch with his family. Our recruitment team had informed me about this phenomenon in the youth system – that I absolutely had to watch him, because they thought he'd be a future great.

"I went to see him, and they were right. His potential was so obvious. Some players have a glass ceiling that you discover quite quickly, and you can doubt their future. With Kylian, there was no doubt."

"YOU COULD GET TWO EIFFEL TOWERS FOR THIS..."

In shocking news, assembling the highest-profile frontline in history hasn't come cheap...

LIONEL MESSI	NEYMAR	KYLIAN MBAPPE
Transfer fee: £0	**Transfer fee:** £198m	**Transfer fee:** £163m
Total wage outlay: £70m	**Total wage outlay:** £335m	**Total wage outlay:** £100m
Weekly salary: £700,000	**Weekly salary:** £720,000	**Weekly salary:** £410,000
Career goals: 762	**Career goals:** 399	**Career goals:** 184
League titles: 10	**League titles:** 5	**League titles:** 4
Champions Leagues: 4	**Champions Leagues:** 1	**Champions Leagues:** 0
World Cups: 0	**World Cups:** 0	**World Cups:** 1

Overall cost £866m (€1.01bn)

Figures correct up to October 5, 2021

Above Mbappe has long since been inspired by a sense of his own destiny

In early August, PSG paid Neymar's €222m Barcelona release clause. Later that month they bagged Mbappe too, despite interest from Real Madrid, which would have given the French tyro the chance to play with his idol Cristiano Ronaldo. One morning, Ferrer arrived at Mbappe's house at 8am, armed with croissants in a bid to secure the deal.

"With Neymar it was much easier," he says. "There was no discussion with Barça, you just had to know about the 'secret' clause. It was Antero Henrique who learned of that and triggered the transfer.

"For Kylian, it was necessary to agree with the player and Monaco, and we had some competition from Real Madrid. It was a very complex transfer. To start with, the money was the main difficulty, because PSG were in the red after Neymar's transfer. We'd worked a lot on the Mbappe file during the summer, and after Neymar's recruitment I thought we would stop there. But Antero gave me *carte blanche* to recruit Kylian – it became a priority and we worked hard to find a solution. The club worked on all of the legal and financial aspects, and I managed the human side and discussions with the family.

"Kylian's parents joked that I slept in a tent next door to their house. What really made the difference was the club's sporting project. Everybody at PSG helped – one day I visited his home in Bondy with Unai Emery, Antero Henrique and our head of youth recruitment, Marc Westerloppe. Emery discussed his plan, his ideas, and assured Kylian that he would be a key player in Paris alongside Neymar. Real Madrid couldn't provide that guarantee, because Zinedine Zidane already had Gareth Bale, Karim Benzema and Cristiano Ronaldo at his disposal. That sporting aspect was key in our discussions with Kylian's father, who knows football very well. We didn't talk about money. Just football."

PSG signed Mbappe on a season-long loan, becoming permanent for £163m a year later to circumvent Financial Fair Play regulations – the source of much controversy that year. When Neymar's lawyers attempted to pay his buy-out clause to La Liga, as is convention in Spain, the league refused to accept the money – they insisted there was no way the French club could possibly be complying with FFP. Instead, the cash was sent directly to a reluctant, and positively fuming, Barcelona.

FFP has remained a thorny issue ever since: PSG were fined £20m in 2014, after UEFA ruled that they had overvalued a commercial contract with the Qatar Tourism Authority. Signing Messi late this summer – when they had already recruited Sergio Ramos, Gianluigi Donnarumma, Georginio Wijnaldum, Achraf Hakimi and Danilo Pereira with no significant outgoings – raised plenty more eyebrows, although UEFA's FFP rules have been relaxed because of the pandemic and Ligue 1's new regulations have been delayed until 2023. PSG insist they have reaped considerable commercial benefits from Messi's arrival, but many rival clubs remain hugely sceptical.

CHOKERS TO CONTENDERS

In the summer of 2017, PSG had got the two men they wanted, for the two biggest transfer fees in history. With Neymar and Mbappe to the fore, PSG scored a club-record 171 goals in all competitions, regaining the Ligue 1 title by 13 points as well as winning both domestic cups. In the Champions League group stage they slaughtered Celtic 5-0 and 7-1, and finished ahead of Bayern Munich after a 3-0 victory at the Parc des Princes.

In 2018-19, they won the title once more and topped their Champions League group ahead of eventual winners Liverpool, thanks to a 2-1 victory against the Reds.

"Neymar and Mbappe brought confidence to the team, and an even stronger desire to win," continues Ferrer.

In both seasons, though, Neymar missed key Champions League knockout ties with a metatarsal injury, and things went awry. Defeat to Real Madrid in 2018 was followed by a shock home loss to Manchester United in 2019, having won the away leg 2-0. PSG had choked once more – it was Barcelona parts *deux et trois*. Their Brazilian superstar watched helplessly from the sidelines, before earning a one-match ban for instructing the VAR match officials to "go f**k yourselves" via Instagram.

When PSG faced Rennes in the 2019 Coupe de France Final, Mbappe was sent off late on for a rash tackle, as Les Parisiens blew a 2-0 lead to lose on penalties. Neymar made yet more negative headlines after lashing out at

a fan who'd insulted him as he walked up the steps to collect his runners-up medal.

Frustrated that he was getting no closer to winning the Ballon d'Or – while Mbappe won the 2018 World Cup, Neymar couldn't help Brazil past the quarter-finals – the Brazilian decided that two years in France had been enough. Irritated by the number of heavy tackles he'd received in Ligue 1, and irked by criticism from the French media, Neymar was absent for the start of pre-season and insisted that he wanted to rejoin Barcelona – even offering to pay €20m himself to help finalise a deal. "He thought, 'OK, the best I played in my life was with Messi, so I need to play with him again'," explains Ivan San Antonio. "But Barça couldn't deal with PSG."

Les Parisiens kept hold of their petulant star, and have been inching closer to their ultimate goal of winning the Champions League ever since. With Neymar finally fit to feature in the crucial knockout matches of 2019-20, both he and Mbappe provided vital assists in a come-from-behind victory against Atalanta in Lisbon. Finally, they had progressed beyond the last eight, yet both stars missed opportunities in an agonising final defeat to Bayern.

Above Messi opened his PSG account with a cracking strike against Man City

Last season, they combined to gain some sort of revenge on the Germans – winning 3-2 in the quarter-finals in Munich, when Mbappe terrorised the hosts on the counter.

"Neymar and Mbappe have been a success at PSG, because a year and a half ago, there was always this idea that they would suffer a psychological tragedy that would end in a crazy way, like the Barcelona *remontada* or the game at home to Manchester United," says *L'Equipe*'s Minonzio. "But you don't have that feeling any more.

"When PSG score the first goal, if Mbappe is playing, usually they go on to win. Bayern tried to play higher up the pitch, which was a nightmare because he's too fast."

Manchester City ended their hopes in the semi-finals last time out, when Mbappe was injured for the second leg, but the forward had previously scored a hat-trick as PSG demolished Barcelona 4-1 at the Camp Nou. It was only the second time he'd ever been on the same pitch as Messi – he'd produced one of the best performances of his life on the first occasion too, scoring twice against Argentina at the World Cup.

Such European displays made it all the more surprising that PSG came second to Lille in Ligue 1 last term. An 18-day turnaround between the 2020 Champions League Final and their opening game of the new season didn't help, particularly when that gap was filled by an international break. By contrast, Lille hadn't played for more than five months. PSG then lost their first two matches after Neymar, Mbappe and several other players caught COVID-19.

Expected to bounce back from their bad start, just as Manchester City did in England, instead their squad depth was exposed. Neymar missed 16 games because of injury and suspension – he was sent off twice, the second in a home defeat to Lille. PSG lost

(NEARLY) ONE-CLUB MEN

Like Messi, these Champions League winners looked like they'd spend their entire careers at a single club – before a late career move...

IKER CASILLAS

After 725 appearances for Real Madrid, the goalkeeper departed in 2015 – his parents claimed he'd been forced out by president Florentino Perez. Casillas joined Porto and won the league in 2018. A year later, he suffered a heart attack, aged 37. He never played again.

STEVEN GERRARD

A European champion in Istanbul, Gerrard's 17 campaigns as a Liverpool player ended with a 6-1 shellacking at Stoke in 2015. He headed to MLS with LA Galaxy, but didn't enjoy the lengthy journeys to away matches and hung up his boots less than 18 months later.

XAVI

If there's a perfect way to sign off at your boyhood club, it's by lifting the Champions League trophy. Xavi did that when Barcelona beat Juventus in 2015 – then he jetted to Qatar to join Al Sadd, playing for four more years before taking over as their manager.

ANDRES INIESTA

Xavi and Iniesta seemed joined at the hip for most of their career. Few would have been too surprised if Iniesta had pitched up at Al Sadd as well, but the playmaker flew further east to Vissel Kobe. Now 37, his current contract at the J.League outfit runs until 2023.

eight league games in total, but Neymar and Mbappe started together in just two of them. Disappointment followed on the international stage, too: Neymar was defeated by Messi in the Copa America final, while Mbappe was France's penalty fall-guy at the Euros, having failed to score at the tournament.

"HI, I'M LEO"

Messi's transfer to Paris proved the perfect pick-me-up – at least for Neymar. "What I'd like most of all is to play with Messi again," he declared last December. "We have to do it next season." Whether he meant at PSG or Barcelona was unclear – Joan Laporta has since claimed that Neymar approached his old club about a return following March's presidential election, but the Brazilian later signed a new deal in France.

Mbappe didn't seem quite as thrilled about Messi's arrival, however. Unwilling to extend a contract that expires next summer, and the subject of a £145m summer bid from Real Madrid, he was ready to go.

That Neymar and Mbappe have both tried to leave is hardly a ringing endorsement of the PSG experience – each of the club's strike trio had been hoping to play in La Liga this season, not Ligue 1. Like Neymar's move to PSG, Mbappe's wantaway wish boiled down to a desire for individual honours.

"He's obsessed with being the best player in the world, and quickly," says Minonzio. It's been suggested that even on the night that Mbappe won the World Cup final aged 19, he felt a tinge of disappointment that he'd only scored one goal, not two, because it wasn't enough to make him France's standout star and earn him the Ballon d'Or.

"He hates it when someone says, 'Come on, Kylian, you're only 22, you still have plenty of time'. His target is to be the number one at a huge club, and he's understood that's not possible at PSG. At the end of last season he said he wasn't happy with PSG's season, and wanted to be at a club to win. The underlying message was, 'With PSG I cannot win, so I'm going to leave'.

"That narrative doesn't work now that Messi has arrived – the sporting director Leonardo said, 'OK, that's not the case any more, so he has to sign a new contract'. But Mbappe feels it will be easier to become the number one in the world at Real Madrid."

Despite the massive offer for a player who had just a year left on his deal, PSG rejected Los Blancos' overtures. The club's owners are determined to head into next year's winter World Cup as European champions – a status symbol worth more than any money offered for Mbappe's services.

What's more, the club see the 22-year-old as their project's centrepiece. A free transfer to the Bernabeu appears likely next summer, but many hope he will change his mind.

"Mbappe is crucial for PSG," says Rai. "He's the youngest of the forward trio, he's French and has a bright future. Keeping him could make a big difference."

If this does prove to be the one and only season that Messi, Neymar and Mbappe play together, it creates an intriguing dynamic – three stars who can only win the Champions League by working in tandem, but who are competing against each other for the Ballon d'Or. It could drive each of them to greater heights, or tear them apart.

"MESSI WON'T PRESS BECAUSE HE NEVER DOES, NEYMAR CAN'T UNLESS HE'S FIT AND MBAPPE WON'T IF THE OTHER TWO DON'T"

Above "Oi, which one of you said I was a tramp?"

The early signs weren't promising, when cameras caught Mbappe complaining about Neymar after being substituted at home to Montpellier. "That tramp doesn't give the pass to me," he told Idrissa Gueye.

Developing the sort of three-way friendship that Messi, Suarez and Neymar enjoyed at Barcelona could be crucial to their on-field success, but that will take some time. The triumvirate's first match together ended in an underwhelming Champions League draw at Club Brugge where PSG were out-shot by the Belgians. MNM struggled to establish an understanding without leaving the midfield over-exposed. When they linked up for the first time in Ligue 1 against Lyon, in a front four alongside Angel Di Maria, PSG grabbed a last-gasp victory – but again the balance of the team didn't look right.

"I'm not sure whether it will work," admits Minonzio. "In France we're obsessed with the 2002 World Cup. We were world champions, we were supposed to go all the way, and we had Thierry Henry, David Trezeguet and Djibril Cisse – the top scorers in the Premier League, Serie A and Ligue 1. We didn't score a single goal at that World Cup.

"It was very similar at Euro 2020 – we had Benzema, Mbappe and Antoine Griezmann, and there were a lot of headlines saying we had the best attack in the world. But football isn't just about putting great players in the team, it's about everyone working together. In that first Champions League game against Bruges, there were times when they lost the ball and all three guys were walking around. Messi won't press because he never does, Neymar can do it but only if he's fully fit, and Mbappe won't press if he's the only one doing it. You can't win trophies if you've only got seven outfield players trying to get the ball back. You can do it against smaller teams, but you don't have the ball as much in the Champions League."

Not only that, but expectations are huge. "People expect a spectacle and they expect magic performances," insists Rai. "My PSG team reached the Champions League semis, but the expectations weren't the same. We brought PSG to a higher standard, but didn't have to win the Champions League. We beat Barcelona in the quarter-finals, then lost to Milan in the last four.

"It was seen as an important achievement, like when we won the Cup Winners' Cup in 1996. Now, France have won basically every big title in every sport, but that wasn't the case then, so a European trophy was huge – not only for PSG fans, but for the nation. The current team can take PSG to another level, like we did back then. For them, the next step is winning the Champions League, and they're capable of making that dream come true. If that front three play like they've been playing over the last few seasons, PSG will achieve success."

As the trio gained familiarity, Les Parisiens began 2021-22 with eight consecutive wins at the top of Ligue 1, netting 22 goals in the process. Then they hosted Manchester City, when Messi grabbed a stunning first goal for the club from a clever Mbappe flick as PSG won 2-0. Far from sensational, they'd beaten one of the best teams in Europe. With Messi, anything is possible.

"He's still the best in the world," declares Saviola, who played alongside the Flea during his early years in Barça's first team. "Today's Leo has improved in every aspect from those days – much more punch in front of goal, and above all else his understanding of the game. Today's Leo has an innate intelligence – he knows what's required in every moment of a game. Everyone was shocked when he had to leave Barcelona, but if he were to go, the best club for him was PSG – a place where he has a real opportunity to win the Champions League. Once there's more understanding between all of the players, I think they'll be almost unstoppable."

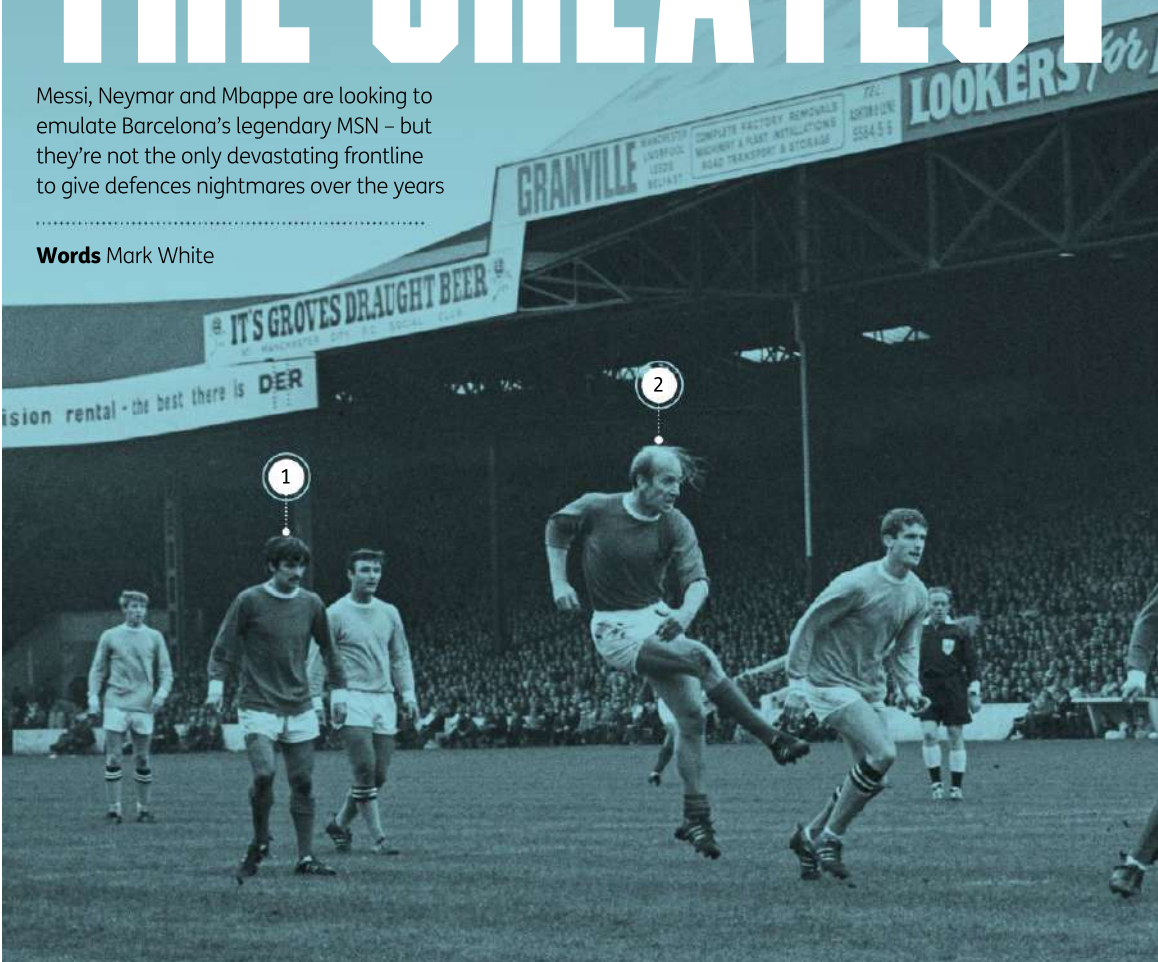
Emblazoned across the Parc des Princes roof, there's a slogan – '*Revons Plus Grand*'. Dream Bigger. This may not be the romantic dream of an underdog – plenty rejoiced at Rennes' October defeat of the nouveau-riche Parisians – but no club has ever plunged quite so much money into one forward line, and the quest for success.

Football's biggest fish have been placed into a historically modest pool – the next few months will tell us if they devour defences, or just themselves. Messi, Neymar, Mbappe: the world is watching. PSG haven't got one shark in a bathtub – they've got three.

THE GREATEST

Messi, Neymar and Mbappe are looking to emulate Barcelona's legendary MSN – but they're not the only devastating frontline to give defences nightmares over the years

Words Mark White



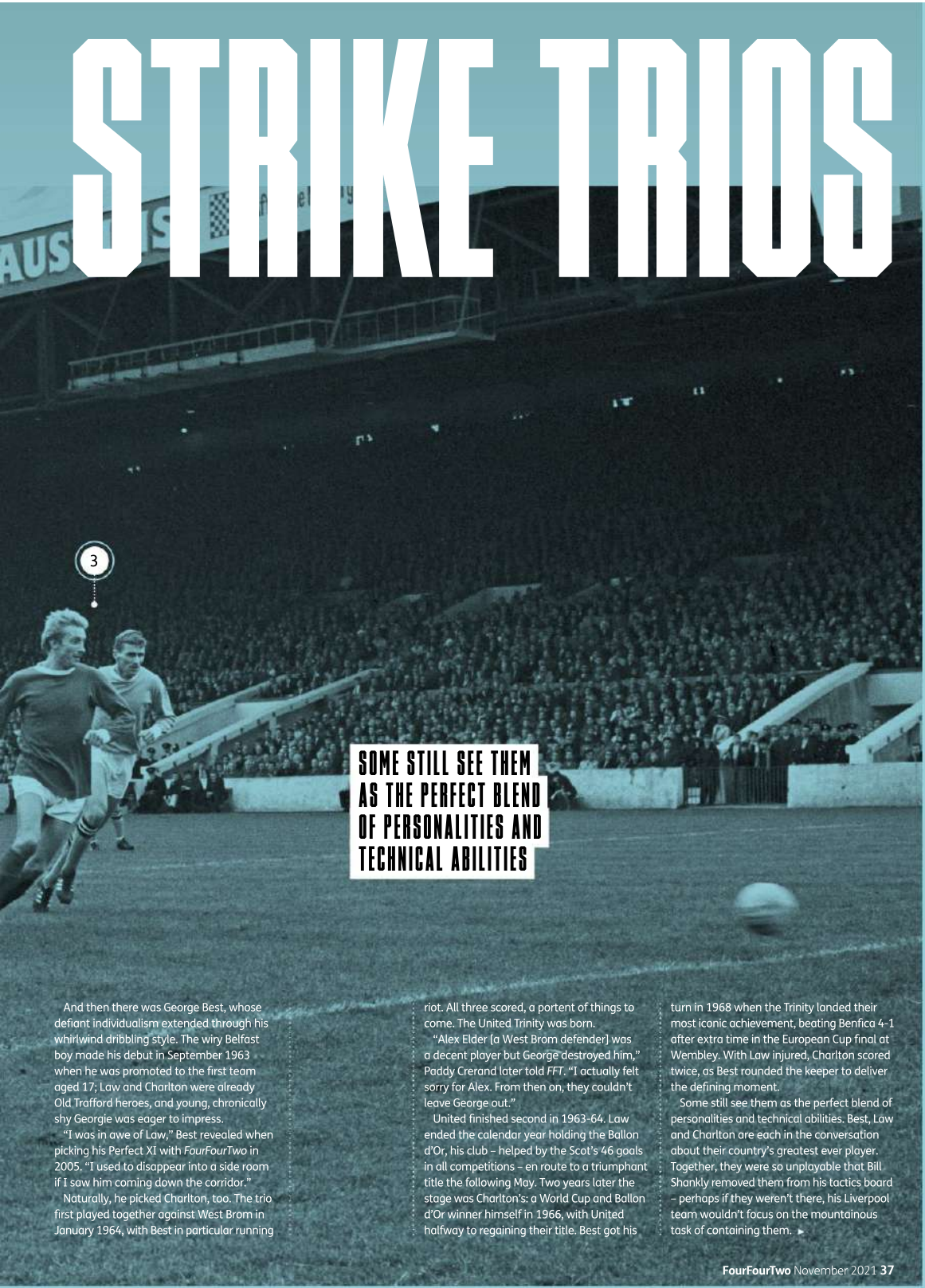
BEST, CHARLTON & LAW

Ever heard the one about the Englishman, Scotsman and Northern Irishman who walked into a football club and changed it forever? Manchester United fans know this is no joke.

Bobby Charlton came first, thrust into action just before his 19th birthday in 1956. The future Munich Air Disaster survivor was a thoughtful player with no favoured foot, an expressionist outside the penalty area with a long-range shot as striking as *The Scream*.

Denis Law was interested in punctuation only: the lethal forward buried any dropping ball within the area and plundered 29 goals in 1962-63, his first season at Old Trafford.

STRIKE TRIOS



SOME STILL SEE THEM AS THE PERFECT BLEND OF PERSONALITIES AND TECHNICAL ABILITIES

And then there was George Best, whose defiant individualism extended through his whirlwind dribbling style. The wiry Belfast boy made his debut in September 1963 when he was promoted to the first team aged 17; Law and Charlton were already Old Trafford heroes, and young, chronically shy Georgie was eager to impress.

"I was in awe of Law," Best revealed when picking his Perfect XI with *FourFourTwo* in 2005. "I used to disappear into a side room if I saw him coming down the corridor."

Naturally, he picked Charlton, too. The trio first played together against West Brom in January 1964, with Best in particular running riot. All three scored, a portent of things to come. The United Trinity was born.

"Alex Elder [a West Brom defender] was a decent player but George destroyed him," Paddy Crerand later told *FFT*. "I actually felt sorry for Alex. From then on, they couldn't leave George out."

United finished second in 1963-64. Law ended the calendar year holding the Ballon d'Or, his club – helped by the Scot's 46 goals in all competitions – en route to a triumphant title the following May. Two years later the stage was Charlton's: a World Cup and Ballon d'Or winner himself in 1966, with United halfway to regaining their title. Best got his turn in 1968 when the Trinity landed their most iconic achievement, beating Benfica 4-1 after extra time in the European Cup final at Wembley. With Law injured, Charlton scored twice, as Best rounded the keeper to deliver the defining moment.

Some still see them as the perfect blend of personalities and technical abilities. Best, Law and Charlton are each in the conversation about their country's greatest ever player. Together, they were so unplayable that Bill Shankly removed them from his tactics board – perhaps if they weren't there, his Liverpool team wouldn't focus on the mountainous task of containing them. ▸

BENZEMA, BALE & CRISTIANO

As MSN dominated La Liga, so came the BBC in response – not a titanic struggle over breaking news, but Real Madrid's emphatic answer to Barcelona's version of the Avengers.

Gareth Bale had actually joined Real Madrid a whole season before Luis Suarez's Barça arrival in 2014, but there was no pals act in the Spanish capital. 'BBC' was an accidental attack, formed purely after Florentino Perez signed the most exciting forward that Madrid didn't have. As a result, Ronaldo and Bale were both left to deflect questions over their relationship status throughout their five years together; *Football Leaks* even proved that Los Blancos had hidden Bale's true world-record price tag, to keep the toys in Cristiano's man-sized pram.

Even on the pitch, the pair's relationship looked icy cold. Ronaldo and Bale seemed to be in battle to finish each other's sentences, and 73 Madrid goals in the 2013-14 season came through either player's individual brilliance – see Bale's Copa del Rey-winning sprint around Marc Bartra, or Ronaldo's drilled free-kick under Bayern Munich's wall during a 4-0 dismantling. They didn't work together, but they did push each other on to impossible excellence.

Between them was Karim Benzema, happy to shy away from the blinding spotlight. "For Cristiano to be in love with another attacking player means he does a lot for Cristiano," smirked former boss Jose Mourinho. Indeed, the Frenchman grabbed 24 goals in all competitions for himself, but began drifting from his centre-forward spot to create and link up with Angel Di Maria. It might have appeared a creative rebirth, but this was just a new way for Benzema to bully defenders.

It worked. "In terms of trophies, you could argue we're the best team ever – we've won four Champions Leagues in five years," Bale told *FFT* when Ronaldo broke up the band and joined Juventus in 2018.

All three scored across those four finals. They may have had their differences, but they each had one major thing in common: the hunger to outscore their opposition... and win titles.

PELE, GARRINCHA & VAVA

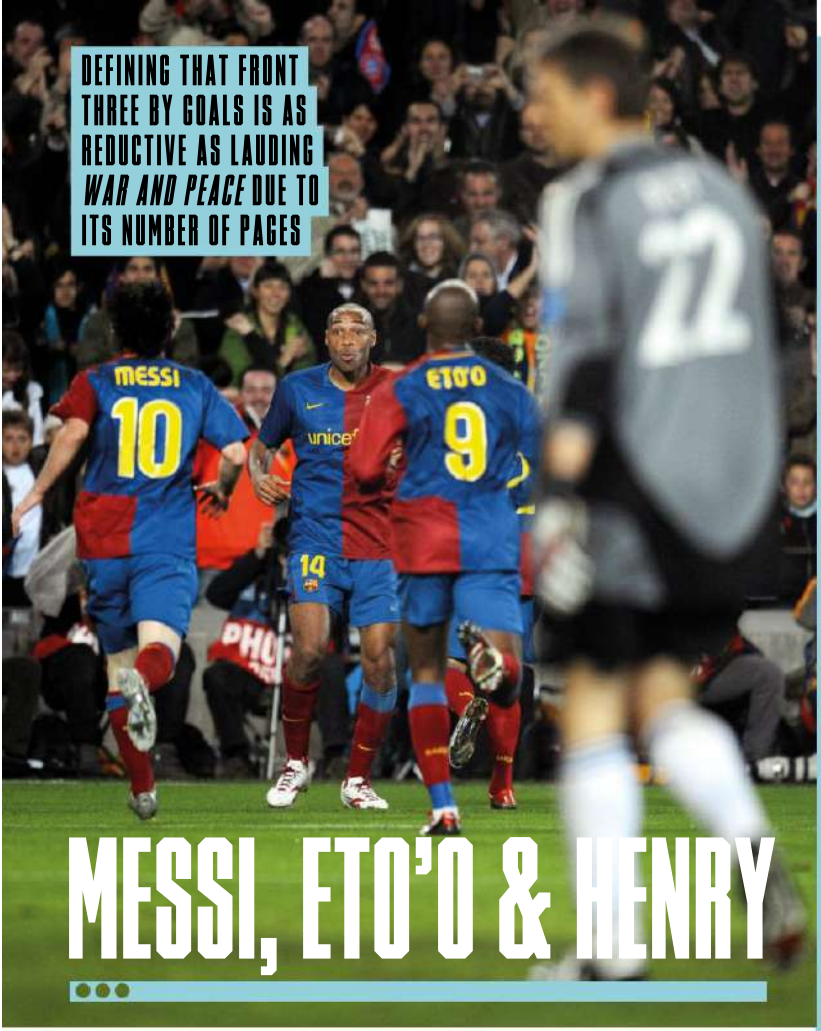
Thanks to Venezuela's withdrawal from qualifying, Brazil only needed to beat one opponent to reach the 1958 World Cup. In Sweden, two men and a baby lit their fire.

Vava, Garrincha and 17-year-old Pele all swayed to a samba beat that the Selecao would copy for generations, wreaking havoc in their fabled 4-2-4 setup. The deep-lying Mario Zagallo completed a flowing frontline, 12 years before coaching Pele to *O Rei*'s record third crown in 1970.

Incredibly, however, '58 boss Vicente Feola had some concerns. While the teenage Pele was assessed by a psychologist (conclusion: "obviously infantile – he lacks the necessary fighting spirit"), Garrincha was a study in anarchy. The 'Bent-Legged Angel' – he was born with one leg 6cm longer than the other – lived to beat defenders to the point he'd often go back just to humiliate them again.

It didn't take long to bash the doubters. The triad produced moments of genius – not least in the final against Sweden, when both Vava and Pele bagged braces – to storm to a first World Cup. They retained it four years later thanks to one-man tornado Garrincha.

A fresh, multiracial and audacious face of Brazilian football had emerged.



DEFINING THAT FRONT THREE BY GOALS IS AS REDUCTIVE AS LAUDING *WAR AND PEACE* DUE TO ITS NUMBER OF PAGES

MESSI, ETO'O & HENRY

Pep Guardiola has arguably still never topped his first iconic front three. Lionel Messi, Samuel Eto'o and Thierry Henry hit 38, 36 and 26 goals in all competitions during Barça's Treble-winning 2008-09 – but to define them purely by goal output is as reductive as eulogising *War and Peace* for its number of pages.

Henry retained his cheekiness from years of playing street football in Paris – Pep even subbed him once, for attempting to overload Messi's flank against instruction – while Eto'o could as easily cut open defences with a deft flick as he could crush them with a sweetly struck volley. And then there was Messi, long out of Ronaldinho's shadow, pivoting on a peseta and toying with defenders. Despite his love of Catalan songwriter Lluis Llach, Guardiola himself never cared much for poetry. But while the world fawned over his creation, Messi, Eto'o and Henry battered opponents by adding intent to elegance.

Barça beat Real Madrid 6-2 that season, with Messi deployed as a befuddling false nine, and Eto'o and Henry converging into the box to complete a terrifying triumvirate. They hit Bayern for four and Atletico for six: each scored at least one goal in both games.

Henry followed up an underwhelming first campaign by fizzing as Pep's men made history; Eto'o doubled his previous season's goal output; as did Messi, who came of age among the elite. Only a season earlier, the Flea hadn't even been able to look Henry in the face after the Frenchman's arrival from Arsenal, so in awe was he of the Gunners great's prior achievements.

But Henry had never sealed Champions League glory like Messi did in 2009 against Manchester United, as Barça schooled their Premier League adversaries with a supreme display that tied up a titanic hat-trick of trophies. After Eto'o had turned Nemanja Vidic inside-out to prod home the opener in Rome, the 5ft 7in attacker ghosted beyond Rio Ferdinand to head Los Cules' decisive second goal.

"I lost sleep over that [goal] many, many times," Ferdinand later admitted.

Not bad for someone who "couldn't score a header even if they put a top hat on him", as Terry Venables had said before pre-game.

CRUYFF, REP & RENSENBRINK

According to Rinus Michels' free-flowing *Totaalvoetbal*, anyone could have slotted into the Netherlands' front three. But come the 1974 World Cup Final, the three forwards on his teamsheet had come to symbolise an entire nation's ideology.

Johan Cruyff wasn't just anyone. This was a Lennon-like figure, with shoulder-length hair who could dribble as if the ball were stuck to his feet. The instinctive Johnny Rep was Cruyff's McCartney at Ajax; the duo combining expertly to win the club's third straight European Cup in 1973.

Rob Rensenbrink, meanwhile, was the outlier. Neither an Ajax boy nor a Feyenoord product, the forward was instead well on the way to establishing himself as an Anderlecht legend. But Michels wanted his Ringo.

The Dutch were fluent by the second group stage, as attackers swooped and swivelled like fighter planes. They destroyed Argentina 4-0, with Cruyff bagging a brace and Rep his fourth in as many appearances, then saw off defending champions Brazil.

The final loss to West Germany in Munich has become infamous, but for one shining summer the Brilliant Oranje frontline inspired and devastated with equal effect.

SALAH, MANÉ & FIRMINO

"They make it easy for me; we make it easier for each other," Mohamed Salah told *FFT* with a beaming grin in 2018 when asked about his deadly link-up with Sadio Mané and Roberto Firmino.

But you'd be forgiven for expecting a little friction at the start. Initially, the trio looked a little like three square pegs waiting for their manager to whittle them into shape – two didn't have extensive experience in their designated position, after all. It was Salah's remit to stretch defences, cut inside and fire in shots with his left foot; Mané, meanwhile, was shifted to an unfamiliar left-wing berth and tasked with rounding his game: drifting infield, creating opportunities and finishing them off himself.

It proved a masterstroke. The Senegalese speedster flourished there, relishing the link-up play and freedom that Jurgen Klopp allowed him, just as Firmino had done in an unfamiliar role up top a campaign earlier.

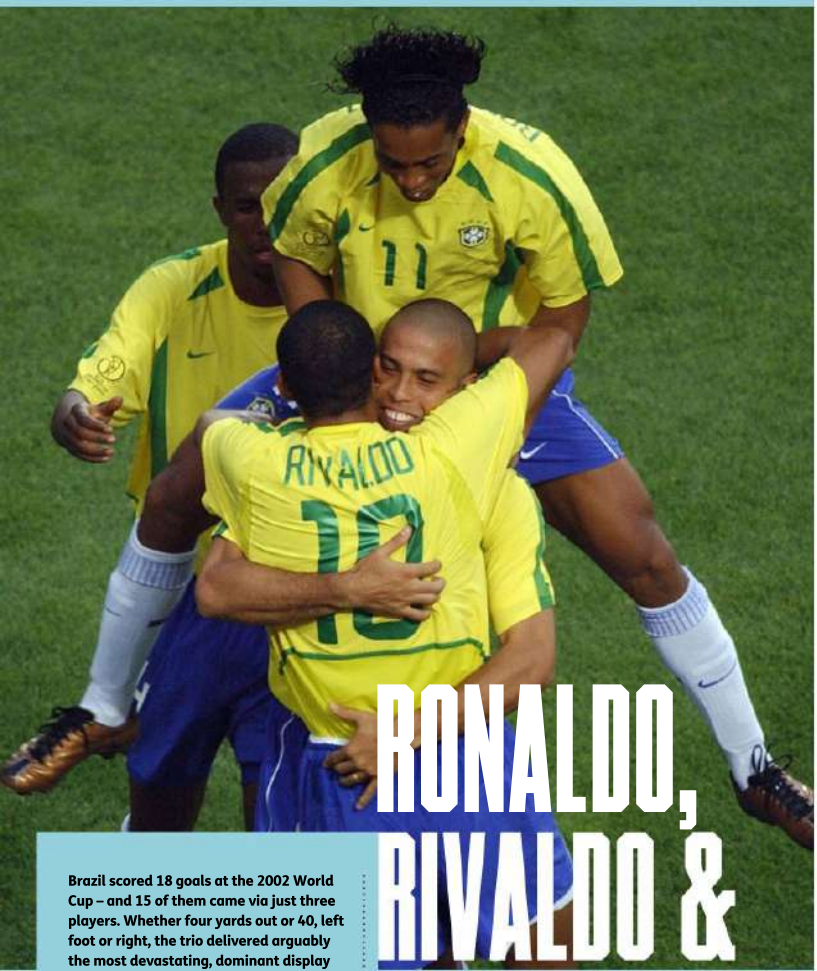
The Fab Three were greater than the sum of their parts. They shattered Manchester City's unbeaten season in January 2018, each scoring in 10 second-half minutes as City's defence crumpled against the red tide. They all netted against Pep Guardiola's side in Europe that season too, before helping themselves against Roma in a 5-2 thrashing.

It wasn't just in their relentless net-busting pursuit that they became noteworthy – this was also Klopp's first line of defence. Mané, Salah and Firmino set the template for the Premier League press; they never needed a playmaker because chances came from their constant closing down of defenders, sustaining pressure and sucking up space.

Before long, Liverpool's front three was unbreakable. Salah scored 44 and assisted 14 more in his debut campaign across all competitions, as the Reds were beaten in the Champions League final; Mané scored 20 and assisted nine; Firmino 27 and 16. The exhilaration of their electric pace cooled into consistency across seasons two and three, as the trio soared into the stratosphere. They conquered Europe in 2019 as a cohesive counterpressing unit controlled games with swagger, then finally secured a long-awaited league title in 2020. Liverpool became the Inevitables, effectively securing their crown with half a season still to complete. Not even COVID-19 could stop them.

"Imagine where I'd be if these boys would not play for me... wow!" Klopp chuckled after Salah notched the trio's 250th Liverpool goal that July. He certainly wouldn't be a man with that kind of grin...

THE FAB THREE WERE GREATER THAN THE SUM OF THEIR PARTS, AND A RELENTLESS MACHINE



RONALDO, RIVALDO & RONALDINHO

Brazil scored 18 goals at the 2002 World Cup – and 15 of them came via just three players. Whether four yards out or 40, left foot or right, the trio delivered arguably the most devastating, dominant display from a frontline in tournament history.

The Three Rs became quintessential Brazilian profiles. Ronaldinho, the youngest of the three, brought the gurning joy, his mane untamed as he danced on the ball. Ronaldo assumed the hitman role after his tumultuous France 98 and injury-ravaged build-up restricted his explosive pace to shorter bursts around the area. That left Rivaldo as the elder statesman of the three: a wily wizard capable of combining creativity with clinical finishing, and even deftness with darkness – as proved with his comical play-acting against Turkey.

Width came from the wing-backs – hello, this is Brazil – while the midfield screened counter-attacks. The Selecao's frontline was capable of slicing through even the deepest defences with power, speed or grace. They could give you life; they could take it away.

The memories are still fresh nearly two decades on. Rivaldo's composure to swivel and drill the ball past Belgium, or his cool side-footed equaliser beyond David Seaman on the stroke of half-time in the quarter-final against England. Both goals were assisted by Ronaldinho: the latter the result of a surging moment of buck-toothed brilliance from the centre circle, only eclipsed by the subsequent free-kick drifted over Seaman. Then there was Ronaldo getting to everything before anyone else, netting his seventh and eighth goals in the Yokohama final to draw level with Pele's tally at World Cups.

It wasn't merely the goals but the entire package that made the trio's chemistry special. They entertained as much as any Selecao strikeforce before, and certainly more than any since. Apart, they were three of the most talented players of theirs – or any other – generation. Together, they conjured magic that may never be reproduced by the Brazilian national team... or any team, for that matter.

MULLER, HOENESS & RUMMENIGGE

Gerd Muller, Uli Hoeness and Karl-Heinz Rummenigge have a centre-back to thank for their legacy. In the 1974 European Cup Final against Atletico Madrid, Ol' Big Ears was slipping away from Bayern Munich in Brussels when Hans-Georg Schwarzenbeck tried his luck from distance in the last minute of extra time.

Hoeness and Muller scored two apiece in the replay, then lost 5-0 to Monchengladbach the following day while still drunk. Die Roten relied on their close-knit harmony. "We had an instinctive understanding," midfielder Franz Roth claimed. "It helped that we were all from Munich or nearby."

Hoeness and Muller seemed particularly telepathic. The former was an architect in open spaces, the latter an assassin when there was seemingly no room to be found. When youngster Rummenigge moved 350 miles south from Borussia Lippstadt in 1974, he slotted in like he'd grown up there, too. They were destructive. Bayern retained their European Cup against Leeds, before the trio started the 1976 final against Saint-Etienne, making it three in a row.

Together and apart, they helped shape the lineage of German football.

MARADONA, GIORDANO & CARECA

"You don't know what you missed," was spray-painted onto the walls of a Naples cemetery in the summer of 1987.

Street parties were held, pasta shared by strangers, and pretend funerals – complete with death notices and coffins – held for Juventus as Napoli hailed a first Scudetto.

That was what Brazilian forward Careca arrived to from Sao Paulo. The striker landed with pace, power and a reputation as the guy who was always in the right place. Boy, had he come to the right kind of party here.

The 26-year-old star was to be the third point of a new constellation: 'Ma-Gi-Ca'. To one side was Bruno Giordano: explosive, two-footed and as reliable as clock hands. To the other was diminutive demigod Diego Maradona, whose arrival from Barcelona in 1984 had sent Naples into a febrile frenzy.

Serie A goals were a valuable currency. Defences were iron-clad, yet Diego posted a league-high 15 goals in 1987-88, ahead of Careca's 13 and Giordano on eight. Napoli were still unbeaten by Christmas: Careca and Giordano were forever free for Maradona's assists, though both would step aside for one of Diego's masterclasses. It appeared choreographed, as if the Argentine were his team-mates' ventriloquist.

Ultimately, Napoli threw the title away just five games from glory. Juventus made the Little Donkeys pay for their hubris with a 3-1 defeat, then rollercoaster losses to Milan and Fiorentina followed, before an exhausted slump to Sampdoria confirmed Milan's title. The show was over: Giordano, by then turning 32, departed for Ascoli.

A UEFA Cup and second Scudetto would come in 1989 and 1990, but it was only ever Maradona painted in 30ft murals. Ma-Gi-Ca's legacy became a Neapolitan footnote; a short and sweet tale of delirium and hangover.

Even Silvio Berlusconi craved a sip of the cocktail. "He wanted Maradona at Milan," Careca told *FFT*, "he actually came in for me as well." Silvio apparently offered a choice of a Lamborghini, Ferrari or Rolls-Royce. For a while, Napoli had all three in their attack.

ROONEY, RONALDO & TEVEZ

Generally, it's defensive stalwarts and midfield enforcers who hold a mirror to the dugout – but perhaps never before had a front three reflected their manager as much as Manchester United's 2008 Champions League-winning attack.

Jose Mourinho had torn up a very British blueprint; he was the first Premier League manager to win a title with a 4-3-3. Arsene Wenger used Thierry Henry upfront alone in Europe, while Rafa Benitez padded out his midfield of Steven Gerrard and Xabi Alonso with Momo Sissoko. There were rumblings that even Sir Alex Ferguson wouldn't be able to keep up.

Leaning on Carlos Queiroz's tactical nous, Fergie rebuilt his team around a ferocious frontline. Carlos Tevez joined from West Ham, Cristiano Ronaldo dazzled on the flanks and Wayne Rooney knitted it all together with his unique blend of intensity and artistry.

In a lopsided 4-4-2, Ronaldo ripped home 42 goals in all competitions in 2007-08; Tevez smashed 19 and Rooney 18. Each of them felt moulded in their gaffer's image: stubborn, wily and fiery when necessary. Mourinho may have revolutionised England, but these boys defined it.

PUSKAS, GENTO & DI STEFANO

"Scoring goals is just like making love," Alfredo Di Stefano once claimed. "Everyone can do it, but nobody does it like me."

Some supporters barely noticed that he had team-mates. Real Madrid were *La Saeta Rubia*'s (the Blond Arrow's) backing band and he was football's Elvis Presley: an effortless, magnetic talisman of the '50s. But in 1958, Los Blancos brought in a second superstar. Ferenc Puskas was 31 and already Hungary's pre-eminent footballer before revolution broke out in 1956. Banned for two years for defecting to the West, the 'Galloping Major' was here to do it all again.

Madrid became a new home for these overseas icons to showcase their talents – French great Raymond Kopa also joined – as the club adopted a globetrotters-style model somewhat at odds with Spain's dictatorship under General Franco. It was a multinational, star-studded identity that Los Blancos would return to on the cusp of a new millennium.

Puskas always knew this was Di Stefano's castle: in the final game of his first La Liga season, with both forwards level on goals, he rounded the Sevilla goalkeeper and passed to his mate, rather than rolling the ball into an empty net. Paco Gento made the deadly duo a triumphant trio from his outside-left position, wielding natural flair and express pace. He revelled in the assist.

The three fired Real Madrid to the 1959 European Cup – coach Luis Carniglia paying for his non-selection of Puskas with his job, despite beating Reims 2-0 – before retaining it in 1960 with a 7-3 hammering of Eintracht Frankfurt. Puskas blasted four, Di Stefano the other three. A young Alex Ferguson watched on agog from the Hampden Park stands at "the best team I'd ever seen".

Not all dynasties last forever, though. The five-times champions finally surrendered their crown the following year, and while Di Stefano, Gento and Puskas all started the 1962 and 1964 European Cup Final defeats – Puskas scored a first-half hat-trick in the former – the trio's time at the top was over.

Di Stefano takes the spotlight as Madrid's heart and soul, but his team-mates were just as spectacular. In 1966, Los Blancos reached another European Cup final, helped by Puskas' five goals en route. Then 39, he didn't make the starting XI. Gento, however, captained Madrid to victory against Partizan. He remains the only player to win six European Cups.

"SCORING GOALS IS LIKE MAKING LOVE," DI STEFANO SAID. "EVERYONE CAN DO IT, BUT NO ONE DOES IT BETTER THAN ME"

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EL PRES

Ronaldo has found out the hard way that owning a football club is more difficult than terrorising defenders, but not even relegation from La Liga has dented his ambitions with Real Valladolid. The 45-year-old tells *FourFourTwo* that he's feeling more determined than ever.... and England could be next

Words Marcus Alves

Marcos Andre had yet to score in his debut La Liga campaign with Real Valladolid. Having joined from Celta Vigo over a year earlier, the young Brazilian had started in his new club's B team before being turfed out on loan to second-tier Mirandes. He would get used to being patient: upon his return to Valladolid, six appearances passed without a sniff of glory.

But then he found himself receiving advice from a football icon. Andre couldn't believe it. Valladolid's majority owner, Ronaldo Nazario, wasn't just the young frontman's boss – the former World Cup winner was the man he'd grown up idolising.

When Ronaldo summoned him for a chat before Valladolid's home clash with Athletic Bilbao in November 2020, Andre listened. He listened very carefully, until his hero delivered his final piece of advice. "Just make sure you send the ball a metre in from the post – that's it," chuckled Ronaldo. Few attackers made it look quite as easy as he did... but the pep talk worked out brilliantly for Andre. The forward scored that day, then again in Valladolid's next two matches. By the end of the campaign, although he wasn't able to steer Los Pucelanos clear of relegation, Andre's performances had put him on the radars of multiple sides. It was Valencia who paid €8.5 million to secure his services on a five-year contract in August – a sale celebrated by their relegated rivals located 120 miles north of Madrid.

Ronaldo had worked his magic again: after snapping up Andre for just €500,000 a couple of years earlier, he had bagged a tidy profit. ▸

For the third consecutive year, he had pulled off a major sale, having received €8m from Espanyol for Spanish centre-back Fernando Calero in 2019, and €12m from Southampton for Ghanaian defender Mohammed Salisu the following summer.

Among other things, that's what Ronaldo now regards as success, as he tries to reinvent himself in the game. He has been the face of Valladolid ever since paying around €30m for an initial 51 per cent of the Spanish yo-yo club in September 2018 – a highly unusual move for any ex-footballer, let alone one of his considerable pedigree.

Before Ronaldo, Valladolid's violet jerseys were the only thing that stood out about them in a league dominated by Real Madrid, Barcelona and Atletico Madrid. But it didn't take long for *O Fenomeno* to realise that the prestige of his playing days could open doors that would have otherwise been closed for someone in charge of a mid-level outfit. He knows there's no other club owner like him.

"I've got something that other presidents don't have, which is my history as a player," Ronaldo tells *FourFourTwo* with a knowing smile. "We can all agree it's a very impressive one, so perhaps I can give technical advice that [former Inter supremo Massimo] Moratti and Florentino [Perez, Real Madrid president] couldn't offer back in my time."

Ronaldo the owner may be one of a kind. Even so, his days in the boardroom have, up to this point, been unforgiving. If things had panned out differently, he could even have been duking it out for a place in the Premier League rather than La Liga. There's plenty of time for that later, though...

LONDON CALLING?

Stiven Plaza might not be a household name beyond his mother's kitchen, but the young Ecuadorian was important to Ronaldo. It was while trying to make Plaza his first signing as Valladolid president that the Brazilian realised what his own status meant.

Persuading Independiente del Valle to let go of the teenager proved much trickier than expected. Finally, the South American outfit came up with a curious condition: to seal the deal, Ronaldo would need to fly all the way from Spain to speak with Del Valle's academy players, pose for pictures and attend a press conference in Sangolqui.

No other president would be asked to do the same. Nevertheless, Ronaldo made the trip, and he got his man. As it turned out, he would have to get used to such jet-setting: the famed talisman claims to have travelled more than 100,000 kilometres in only his first season as an owner.

Sometimes, however, all he had to do was show up at the club's office when a new star put pen to paper. Ex-Newcastle playmaker Hatem Ben Arfa demanded as much back in January 2020, and even delayed the signing of his contract by a day to make sure Ronaldo would be there when it happened.

A full decade has passed since the Brazilian hung up his boots at Corinthians, but it hardly seems to matter. The World Cup winner and three-time FIFA World Player of the Year still inspires a generation of players, including Spurs and England striker Harry Kane. Across a glittering career, Ronaldo drove defenders mad with his skills and haunted keepers with his goals – some 400 of them. No opponent could stop him at his peak. Only his fitness could do that.

Ronaldo maintains that he still wants to be able to play again and take part in legends games, but he has perfectly adjusted to life as a football executive. The directors' box at Valladolid's Estadio Jose Zorrilla has become his second home over the past three years.

Yet he may have opted for a very different venue if he'd had his way. While searching for a club to call his own, Ronaldo was contacted about the possibility of purchasing more than one Football League side.

"I was looking for a team to buy and had the help of a few people with it," explains the Brazilian. "There were plenty of opportunities in England, and still are, but since the local leagues are probably the most organised and valuable in the world, the clubs there end up having a far higher valuation than anywhere else in Europe. It's really interesting. Now we all see the Premier League leading the way in

the football industry while the other leagues are doing their best to catch up financially, because competing with English football is so difficult these days.

"Back then, there were some opportunities. Brentford were one of the teams offered to me: I got to talk with them and understand the business plan, and it was very nice. There were also clubs in the third tier with massive potential – Charlton, a London side with big tradition, approached me as well. But these were all opportunities requiring investment of more than £50m. In the end, I decided to purchase Valladolid for a cheaper price and keep the quality of life that I have in Madrid. The short distance between Madrid and Valladolid is very important because it allows me to stay close to my business the whole time, so I think it was the best decision that I could have made."

Clockwise from above *That* haircut in 2002 is a distant memory; Ronaldo insists he was more hands-on during the pandemic than any other president in La Liga; Valladolid led leaders Atletico on the final day, but lost and went down

It may have come as a surprise to some that Ronaldo didn't just put his feet up after a career that made him arguably the first global superstar of the internet age. It also featured one of sport's greatest comebacks, as his eight goals propelled Brazil to 2002 World Cup glory after surgery that sidelined him for 15 months.

However, the truth is that he was never in doubt about his next steps. Ronaldo has been preparing for these moments since he signed his first professional contract with Cruzeiro at 16 – despite his age, he already had a say in such matters, and didn't want others to be in full control of his future.

It's the sort of attitude that turned him into a leader very early in life, and meant that he picked up the 'presidente' nickname inside Brazil's dressing room well before he became a real one at Valladolid.

"The transition from pitch to office actually took some time, because I needed to learn about the new challenges I'd face," admits Ronaldo. "Being a businessman is something that has felt natural to me for a long time, though. At some point during your career, you start making a lot of money and you've got to decide what to do with it and where to invest it. So, that was nothing new for me.

"When I retired in 2011, I launched a sports marketing agency in partnership with the WPP group, which made things easy for me because they already had great know-how of the market. The truth is that I'm a bit like a sponge, absorbing ideas – I've always been interested in everything that involves football and sports marketing.

"A while later, in 2014, I began looking for a club to buy and had an experience with the Fort Lauderdale Strikers [in America's second tier] which was invaluable, too. Nobody can really beat the Americans when it comes to entertainment, so I learned a lot about how they make events, organise a matchday plan and turn it all into a special moment for the local community. Despite not playing in MLS, we were able to get 10,000 to 15,000 people per game. I learned many new things in the US, then travelled to England to study sports management a little more."

WIRETAPS AND WOE

Ronaldo called London home for three years. He improved his English as he went, before deciding that the time was right to embark on a serious new adventure.

"I was already feeling much more confident about taking a big step in my new career," the 45-year-old tells *FFT*, "so I spent the next two years searching for a team in Europe – more specifically, Portugal, Spain or England. One day, I was doing some punditry for Brazilian TV at the 2018 World Cup in Russia when my lawyer called, telling me about the Valladolid opportunity. I thought it sounded awesome, because the city is an hour and a half away from Madrid, where I live. It sounded like the perfect introduction.

"Real Valladolid have history and tradition in Spain. We're 13th in La Liga's all-time table. It seemed to me like an amazing challenge, and the kind that had absolutely everything I needed: a one-team city with a social base that allowed us to develop a project. I made up my mind, and straight after the World Cup we concluded the deal."

As the new owner of Valladolid, one of his first actions was getting to know the oldest season-ticket holders. They weren't too shy ▸

to remind him that, after everything he did to Valladolid as a player – six goals in five league meetings with Barcelona and Real Madrid, including a pair of routs that ended 6-1 and 7-2 – he rather owed them one.

The bar was low: after all, La Pucela have lifted only one major trophy in their 93-year history – the Copa de la Liga, which ran for only five seasons and no longer exists. That was in 1984, when they beat Atletico Madrid in the final. Throughout the 21st century, they have bounced between Spain's top two tiers, suffering four relegations and finishing no higher than 12th in La Liga.

So, it was never supposed to be a walk in the park, but Ronaldo found the club in even worse condition than he'd hoped. He was immediately forced to pay off €25m of debt, which prevented him from strengthening the squad straight away, while his ambitions of building a matchday experience at Estadio Jose Zorrilla were put on hold to focus on more pressing matters: the ground had been barely updated since it was constructed to stage three group games at the 1982 World Cup. Ronaldo couldn't understand why it still had a deep concrete moat between the pitch and stands; removing it helped him to boost the venue's capacity by 3,000.

And then were the kinds of issues he could never have foreseen, including a depressing match-fixing scandal towards the end of the 2018-19 campaign, in which police wiretaps proved that a group of Valladolid footballers were guilty of taking bribes to lose a home game against Valencia. The match pre-dated Ronaldo's ownership, but the Brazilian legend was forced to pick up the pieces.

"Since buying the team, it has been work, work and more work – non-stop," he tells *FFT*. "We've had to rebuild Valladolid nearly from scratch. We spent a lot of time organising the club, implementing our mentality and values, changing the structures and discussing new deals. It's work that demands attention. But I think we've now got facilities that would be considered high-level anywhere in the world."

If his commitment needed proving beyond doubt, Ronaldo upped his stake to 82 per cent in April 2020. El Presidente is serious, all right.

While Ronaldo works mostly from his office in Madrid, he shows what kind of president he is when he mingles with his players at the training ground. He retired 10 years ago, but the former marksman still feels most at ease around fellow footballers, to the extent that he invited some to his home for online *FIFA* matches against the Juventus pair of Paulo Dybala and Douglas Costa.

He didn't stop there: after one Valladolid victory, Ronaldo handed each squad member a PlayStation 5, although even that doesn't compare to taking the entire group over to Ibiza after they narrowly escaped relegation in his first season.

The Brazilian knows what it takes to make a footballer happy. Until his arrival, Valladolid would travel to away games by taking a bus to Madrid and catching a plane from there. He changed that arrangement as soon as he found out about it, and now the team travel on private charter flights.

"I think that sort of reflects how I was as a footballer and the relationships I enjoyed with presidents," he reveals. "I learned a lot about this dynamic with Florentino [Perez] and Moratti, the two presidents I worked for longest in my career. I always saw how close they were to the players, and how they dealt with their problems and demands. I enjoyed an excellent relationship with them myself, so I try to be exactly the same president that they were to me.

"Besides that, I know how a player's head operates. I was one myself for many years, so it's no secret what keeps them motivated; how we can challenge them to win things. You can only achieve this by being close to them and paying attention to their needs.

"I don't believe a suitcase, a computer or an iPhone, which were some of the rewards we gave them, will change their lives – they make enough money to buy all of this stuff themselves. But it's extra motivation... and managing to keep a team motivated is the key to long-term success."

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, Ronaldo wasn't around as much as he'd hoped last season. As a result, he had to observe from a distance as Valladolid slipped to the second division after three consecutive years among the elite – the first time they had spent that long in La Liga since 2009-10.

The president was especially lambasted by supporters for missing a decisive fixture at Real Sociedad after it turned out he'd been 500 miles away, drinking on a fancy yacht in Formentera with a famous Brazilian actor. When the team eventually returned from their 4-1 defeat in San Sebastian, they were welcomed back with a banner that huffed, '*Ronaldo culpable*' – guilty.

When questioned about those protests in a press briefing after Valladolid's relegation was confirmed, the Brazilian was quick to rebuff the criticism coming his way. "It was a very bad season for us considering all the investments we made – a very tough blow," he conceded. "But I was the president who spent more time at his club than any other president during the pandemic."

Ronaldo the owner has also been ruthless when he needs to be. Coach Sergio Gonzalez was sacked days after relegation, and soon followed out of the door by sporting director Miguel Angel Gomez.

"I WAS ALMOST DEAD..."

With the Jose Zorrilla stands now reopened for 2021-22, Ronaldo must deal with the pressure of restoring Valladolid's top-flight status at the first attempt. The Spaniards have never sold more season tickets in the second division: in excess of 18,000 people bought them for the new campaign, making their feelings loud and clear on the opening weekend by chanting, "We don't want cash – we want promotion."

Over the last 20 seasons, however, only 13 of the 60 teams relegated from La Liga have sprung up at the first attempt. Nevertheless, Ronaldo dreams big, and he believes he can take Valladolid back into Europe for the first time since their run to the Cup Winners' Cup quarter-finals in 1989-90.

"It's a pity that this pandemic affected so much of our plans," he sighs. "I think that if we'd had the supporters with us last season, many of the points that we lost would have been won with them in the stadium.

"But now our immediate goal is to get back into the first division. We had a very stressful

ON THE OPENING DAY, FANS CHANTED, "WE DON'T WANT CASH – WE WANT PROMOTION"

transfer market when most of our players received offers, but we did our best to retain them because we want to return to the elite straight away. I trust that we'll start reaping the fruits of all our changes in the coming seasons. We've got an ambitious project to reach at least the Europa League within four or five years."

Ronaldo has rubbished talk that he would be willing to sell Valladolid, and affirmed that he won't leave until he cements his legacy with the Spanish underdogs. He says when that moment comes, the club will be worth much more than the €85m fee that has been discussed in local media.

During the Brazilian's three years in charge of Valladolid, he has recruited some familiar faces. Former Real Madrid, Arsenal and Sevilla forward Julio Baptista has been leading the reserves; Ronaldo's ex-Corinthians colleague Paulo Andre is one of his closest advisers; and also on board is Bruno Mazziotti, a physio who treated the frontman multiple times in his playing days and had brief spells at Paris Saint-Germain and Arsenal.

Top left Ronaldo learned from Perez (someone has to) **Above left** He loved taking on Valladolid in his playing days **Above** It hasn't all been sweetness and light for the legend

With a little help from his friends, Ronaldo can let them do their work and focus on his health – he found out he was "almost dead" after paying a visit to his doctor following a defeat in his first season at the helm. It was the moment he realised quite how difficult a relegation dogfight can be. As a player, he had never felt like that. He had never needed to feel like that.

"I've been paying a lot more attention to my health, playing sports and trying to keep active, because this rollercoaster of emotions every weekend wasn't doing my body much good," he says, with a smile. "But now I'm doing well. I still suffer [with results] because it's part of the game, and it's also an amazing feeling to be there, watching matches and hoping to enjoy a win. Sometimes it doesn't come and frustration sinks in, but I've been exercising frequently and staying healthy to avoid any stress."

A healthy body and healthy mind are both essential if the striking legend is to meet his ambitions with Valladolid. He won't quit until he has made his mark in northern Spain, but make no mistake: Ronaldo the owner is only just getting started. In a few years, he may be investing his cash in a club near you.

Although, sadly, Ronaldo never played for an English side, it feels inevitable that sooner or later he will try to buy one.

"The English league remains a goal for me in the near future," confesses El Presidente, "because when I first started at Valladolid, my idea was to expand the business and try to build a network of teams. Obviously, since I was putting money into Valladolid from my own pocket, I didn't possess the liquidity to invest in other teams simultaneously – and, to be honest, another project at that point would have made things more complicated. But I'm extremely happy with how things are going around here."

Whether it ends up being in Spain, England or elsewhere, an exciting future lies ahead.

Ronaldo is working with DAZN on three original content series. The first is available to watch now: 'El Presidente', a six-part docu-series that goes behind the scenes with him at Valladolid

GRENFELL ATHLETIC

This really should be the friendliest of friendlies. Two teams with a powerful off-field bond and masses of mutual respect, locking horns between a guard of honour and plethora of post-match presentations. You'd understand if the fixture itself had a testosterone-free testimonial feel. Even with loads of firemen playing.

But thankfully, real football kicks in pretty quickly. "They don't want it, they don't want it – HE DOESN'T WANT THAT BALL!" thunders Grenfell Athletic's manager, Rupert Taylor, as his players hunt down a startled full-back. "HE. DOES. NOT. WANT. THAT."

He's not wrong, and it's a compelling spectacle, like a pride of young lions picking off an antelope. That's the key word, in fact: *pride*. Has any team wanted to win for their shirt more than this one?

The animated Taylor sets the tone, maintaining a great motivational bellow for the full 90 minutes, apart from occasional hugs for visiting well-wishers. His is a unique role, but the club he founded also benefits from a diverse array of enthusiasts: the celebrated gardener, the bashful former Premier League striker, the BRIT-nominated hip-hopper. And, most importantly of all, the people of – and affected by – Grenfell.

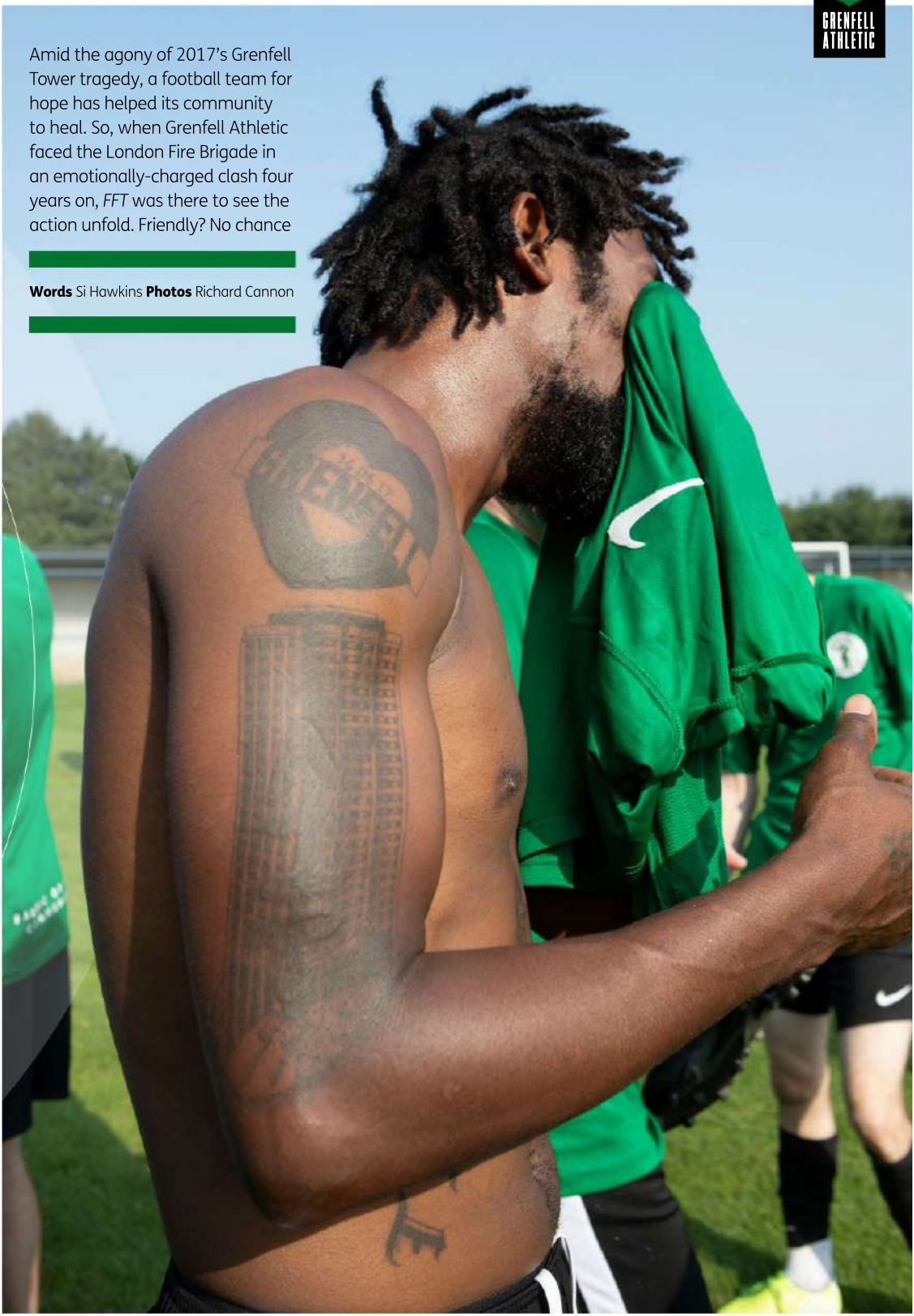
This team represents them. So Taylor takes it very seriously indeed.

"When we first started out, we wanted to create a legacy," he says. "We will do that by any means necessary. I expect this team to be alive long after I'm dead." ▸

GRENFELL ATHLETIC

Amid the agony of 2017's Grenfell Tower tragedy, a football team for hope has helped its community to heal. So, when Grenfell Athletic faced the London Fire Brigade in an emotionally-charged clash four years on, *FFT* was there to see the action unfold. Friendly? No chance

Words Si Hawkins **Photos** Richard Cannon



"I WAS GRIEVING, ANGRY AND CONFUSED. FOOTBALL GAVE ME STRENGTH, IN BODY AND MIND"

"PLAYING FOR GRENFELL IS A PRIVILEGE"

FourFourTwo is in south-west London to see a match that means a great deal, featuring two of the most interesting amateur teams in the country. It's the London Fire Brigade vs Grenfell Athletic, the finale of the latter's recent UK tour of fire service outfits; a sort of footballing thank you if you will, with London an emotional farewell location given what they've experienced together.

Not that the hosts will roll over. Far from it. The famously competitive LFB team boasts a solid core of semi-professional experience, and lots of winners. You can't really imagine firefighters pulling out of tackles.

"The only thing pulling out is the referee's cards," chuckles the firm but friendly John Chinnery, one of LFB's three rotating gaffers. That side – formed in the mid-1970s – have a proud reputation to uphold. "We always win or reach the finals of competitions, so always have a target on our backs."

Grenfell are a much newer proposition, but they've come very far, from unprecedented beginnings. The club was launched just a few weeks after the horrific June 2017 fire which engulfed Grenfell Tower in North Kensington, killing 72 people. Taylor was then managing a local youth side, and within that grieving, displaced community the idea of a football team emerged.

"The first year, it was just about survival," he explains. They kept the club off the radar at first, "to allow the boys healing time". But that soon went pleasingly awry, as Taylor led GAFC to a league and cup double – even he "didn't expect to win two big fat trophies". It's tantalising to wonder how far the team could go, as their status has grown rapidly. The club shirts have gone global – Harry Kane is one famous model – they've got Nando's catering the tour, and the ultimate British status symbol: Cadbury's have even created a Grenfell Dairy Milk.

Still, the manager's tactics probably aren't for everyone. "Rupert, he's easy to love and he's easy to hate," smiles Ryan Moloney, the Virgil van Dijk of the Middlesex County League according to Taylor. "Sometimes you'll think he's being a bit hard, but as you get to know him, everything he does is out of his heart."

Is he pushy? "He's no pushover, I'll say that. He likes things done his way – his way or no way. It takes a bit of time for everyone to get used to that."

Playing for Grenfell Athletic is "a privilege" insists Moloney, who lives locally and joined a few years in. "Some Sunday League teams just turn up on a Sunday. When we turn up, we want to win. And if we don't, we'll have conversations for days about why. It will ruin the week, because for me personally, I look forward to it: Thursday training, then Sunday, putting on the Grenfell shirt."

Having announced themselves to the world, this game against the London Fire Brigade is a major moment. It's being streamed, with an ITN camera crew and newspaper reporters among the crowd. Grenfell really don't want to drop the ball here. And they've not won on this tour yet.

LFB have a very different setup, but similar goals: to help with stressful lives, fundraising, and to send a positive message. They've got a squad of 50 to pick from across the London fire services, but 24/7 shifts mean the players never train. And some of this particular side could be a bit rusty.

"This will be such an emotional match for everybody involved," says coach Chinnery. "We've picked as many of the firefighters that were on duty that evening as possible." That means several will be "putting on their boots for the first time in a long time".

For at least one GAFC stalwart, football has been crucial. Joseph John is a breakout star of the tour so far, but his story could be very different. A Grenfell resident, he survived the fire by carrying his son through a window to safety. John still doesn't have anywhere to call his permanent home, but this team feels like a solid foundation.

"The first time I went to a training session, it was good for me," he reveals. "I was made welcome, I felt loved and I felt calmer. I was grieving. I was angry. I was so confused and didn't know what to do, just stuck in a hotel with my family. Football gave me strength – in my body and my mind."

The first three matches of this pre-season tour were almost a step too far. "Right before the tour I was having little breakdowns – my mental health wasn't so good," John admits of his mental state 10 days out. However, he persevered, as did the team. Grenfell lost to Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue ("we only had 11 players," says Taylor, "with a goalkeeper at right-back"), then earned a creditable 0-0 draw on Merseyside. But Greater Manchester was epic... if surreal, at first.

"Andy Burnham, the mayor, played the first 20 minutes," recalls a bemused Taylor. Was he on the left? "What he did was steer clear from politics on this one. He knew that's not what we're about." Indeed, as the inquests and headlines have continued, the team have been building bridges.

In Manchester, Grenfell were 2-0 down. Cue assessment – "a bollocking," laughs Moloney – and tinkering from the boss. John came on, they changed to three at the back and sprang to life. "The best moment of the tour," smiles Taylor, "was Joseph John making it 3-2."

John concurs. "He told me exactly what he wanted me to do, and I did it. I scored a goal and then jumped on him. I was happy, man. Emotional." But then Manchester equalised to draw 3-3. Now, with one tour game left – the last before their league season kicks off – Grenfell are absolutely busting for the win. No messing.

Above The last leg of Grenfell's tour attracted interest aplenty

"FOR 90 MINUTES, I'M GARETH SOUTHGATE"

Corinthian-Casuals' ground in Tolworth, King George's Field, is an apt setting for this crunch clash. The original Corinthian FC was founded as a bastion of sportsmanship: they famously refused to recognise penalties, because no gentleman would purposefully foul another. Opposite the dressing room doors are posters expounding that Corinthian Spirit.

The Brigade boys arrive first, all business in smart red polo shirts. Chinnery – also involved with Casuals – was here early setting up, so lets fellow manager Dave Bryant do much of the matchday duties. A sharp-witted Essex native, his team talks are worth a listen too.

Bryant is a different person when discussing Grenfell, though. He was on duty that night, and speaks movingly about the after-effects. Firefighters can often compartmentalise, set things aside and get on with the job. "The problem is, the magnitude of this... you can't close the lid," he says. "It's constantly there."

What does offer some respite, for a while, is running a football team.

"Once that whistle blows, for 90 minutes I think I'm Gareth Southgate," grins Bryant. "I do! For 90 minutes, I'm David Moyes. I just want to manage and win. It takes me away. For 90 minutes, I concentrate solely on this. That's my escapism."

The fire service dressing room is quiet and focused when *FFT* sneaks in, Bryant having already done his team talk on the pitch ("the first 10 minutes you might have to suck it up, 'cause they're gonna be up for this").

Grenfell's dressing room is much noisier, until Taylor arrives. We're not privy to his big speech, which apparently is legendary, but he's still going as the players troop towards the tunnel: "I don't care who goes out first. First, second, third: if you're not focused, then you'll be off."

As they assemble, we talk friendlies with today's match officials, who are prepared for anything. "It won't be friendly, it's football," warns the referee. "One tackle and that's it. I've had friendlies abandoned, someone got headbutted, fractured cheek. As soon as you get on that pitch, everything goes."

Grenfell are finally ready, and the firemen line up to applaud them onto the pitch. "We should be giving a guard of honour to them," muses Grenfell frontman Jacob Lord-Garnett. "These boys are the heroes." They clap the firefighters right back.

The proposed 2pm kick-off time whizzes past. There are TV cameras and drone shots, presentations and a genuinely meaningful moment of reflection. But then we're off and the pleasantries fade. LFB enjoy a good first 10 minutes, classily knocking the ball about. Grenfell's more regular 11 get a grip, though, with 39-year-old midfielder Kwasi Frempong mopping up everything in midfield. Looking ▸

GRENFELL ATHLETIC

very lively upfront is Tayshan Hayden-Smith. "His footwork is absolutely ridiculous," said team-mate Moloney, beforehand. "They call him the English Neymar."

Hayden-Smith is pretty impressive off the pitch too, as we will discover post-match: in the wake of Grenfell he began an increasingly popular project called Grow2Know, helping to get city folks gardening. Different worlds, you would think, but Hayden-Smith disagrees: it's about being creative, on grass. "Football and gardening for me are a catalyst to bring people together," he explains. "The positive benefits include health, mental, community."

Trying manfully to stop Tayshan & Co on the pitch is classy centre-half Jon Wharnsby, one of several players making a long-awaited comeback today. "As soon as I heard about the tour, I contacted the gaffer and said, 'If you're picking a team, I want in'."

Wharnsby was also on duty at Grenfell that evening, and as a union representative he's been actively involved since then. "I've got colleagues who've found it very difficult, and we've had firefighters who've had to retire," he reveals. "This match will hopefully prove as cathartic off the pitch – a safe and positive setting for these connected communities to meet once again.

"Everyone deals with stuff in different ways, but the people I know – whether it's your own Watch at the fire station or a team sport – it's endorphin releasing, everyone together," he continues. "Football's a good leveller for that."

After some nervy early minutes, Wharnsby is looking like a leader. But then this is a side full of them. It's a gorgeous sunny afternoon, yet the tempo remains high as LFB attempt to out-manoeuvre Grenfell's youthful energy. Also zippy is Zane Turner, who's intriguingly numberless. Twenty-four players turned up, "but we've only got 21 shirts," laughs Freddie Morris, Taylor's assistant coach. "He bought that shirt himself, off Kitlocker."

Out of nowhere, a big moment. Right-back Imran Wahabi endures lots of Taylor earache during the first half – well, he's nearest – but it seems to work and his searching long pass sets up a glorious opportunity. Has forward Lord-Garnett got the class? He has, sliding it past experienced LFB keeper Nick Wilson. As the supporters noisily celebrate, Taylor keeps his boys focused – "0-0! Go again!" – by trying to pretend they haven't scored at all.

On the opposite bench, Bryant and Chinnery go a bit Fireman Sam Allardyce ("Start using the f**king ball!"), but LFB do look dangerous from set-pieces despite the lack of training. It eventually pays dividends: there's a huge goalmouth scramble and striker Dean Fenton – a veteran non-league scorer, also back for this game – bundles the ball in.

"Well done lino!" screams a raging Taylor, and the gloves are now definitely off; tackles flying. Moloney goes full Van Dijk by hobbling off before half-time, then there's an almighty clash right in the firemen's area. Full-back Jon Aldridge – no, not that one – tries valiantly to catch Grenfell wideman Fasal Kamara, who's about twice his height. The latter cuts inside and shoots, but in slides Aldridge... and ouch. It's brave, and painful. He's left in a groaning heap, while Grenfell's bench loudly appeal for a drop-ball near LFB's goal. Our beleaguered referee appears glad to blow for the break.

"WE AIMED TO BUILD A LEGACY, BY ANY MEANS. THIS TEAM WILL BE ALIVE LONG AFTER I'M DEAD"

Above Grenfell have helped to bring happiness, hope and pride

"HE WAS DOING A DOCUMENTARY. I SAID NO"

It's a novel mixture in the stands during the interval, from moody firemen sporting shades – possibly some stealth promo for that new *Matrix* sequel – to south London kids proudly sporting Grenfell shirts.

One lone fan turns out to be a rapper, DTG, who was on a BRIT-nominated banger from S1MBA last year, *Rover*. Still, he's more excited than we are. "Ohhh, *FourFourTwo* – you guys are in *Football Manager*! Oh my days..."

DTG hails from nearby Croydon and "heard about the team on Instagram, bought their first shirt, got in touch – the power of social media." Perhaps they could collaborate on an anthem? "You know, I was just sitting here thinking about that..."

Behind him is Joseph John's grandmother, resplendent in the latest Grenfell jersey. "It's my first match but I saw him play before, in Trinidad," she declares. An enjoyable day out, then? She shakes a fist. "They have to win!"

That enthusiasm is infectious, and her flesh and blood is right in the thick of things upon the restart. John makes a vital interception, then gets rugby-tackled as Grenfell rampage upfield. Even the spectators wince as studs start flying ("Ref! I know it's a friendly, but..."). Meanwhile, *FFT* gets chatting to a chap stood behind a goal who tells us he's Taylor's dad, Rupert senior. He decided to come late, not being a football guy: he was super serious about badminton and now coaches. They're a motivational dynasty.

Grenfell are still making all the running, but LFB's defence holds firm. Bryant leans against the dugout, looking a tad weary himself after a team talk and reshuffle. "So many injuries, it's doing us," he says. No drinks afterwards, either: he's back on duty tonight. The subbed Aldridge then limps past, ice on leg, looking peeved. Is he OK? "Nope." Bad tackle? "Yep!" Mind you, it was his tackle...

Taylor continues to holler, giving it his best Battle of Agincourt. There's a touch of Jurgen Klopp about his furiously-happy demeanour. "Actually, I'd like to speak to Klopp," says the Liverpool-supporting Grenfell gaffer, "just on a few decisions lately." He probably will, too.

Suddenly, there's a strident new voice from behind that dugout. Rupert senior has joined us and – first game or not – simply can't resist chipping in. Now they're a tag team of tactic shouting. It's Rupert squared. "CONTROL!" *"HEADS UP."* "GREEN BALL!" *"MAKE IT COUNT."* "GREEN BALL!" *"HEADS UP..."*

Speaking of the dugout, it takes *FFT* a whole half to realise the familiar-looking red-headed coach/physio quietly distributing drinks is only ex-Premier League goal-getter Dave Kitson. The one-time Fabio Capello England pick is so low-key that at full-time he will lug loads of kit to the dressing room, then nip off before the presentations. The Secret Football Coach.

"It's been about a year now," Taylor reveals afterwards. "He came to do a documentary, and I said no. But while he was around he said, 'This is incredible, I want to be involved'."

You can certainly see the appeal. Both sides battle on despite the sapping conditions, and it all kicks off in the last few minutes. Young Charlie Cain turns in the box, LFB's Kris Barry makes a risky but decent-looking tackle, the Grenfell youngster tumbles and... penalty!

Barry – feisty all match – is incandescent, batting away Cain's attempted handshake and spoiling for a row. In any other game it may have got nasty, but these teams aren't shy of perspective. Common sense prevails.

"It was minimal contact," Cain later says. "None of them were too happy, but fair play, they're older boys – they've been fighting for 90 minutes. The competitiveness is *unreal*."

Maybe Grenfell will channel that Corinthian Spirit and miss the penalty on purpose? Nah. In fact, there's a debate over who will take it, but not for very long. If Dominic Calvert-Lewin played for Taylor, there'd be no arguments. "He'd say, 'You're on pens, end of'," says the Everton-supporting Frempong. "I looked at Rupert, he said, 'YOU!' So I took it."

It's Grenfell's wisest head up against LFB keeper Wilson: formerly of Crewe and a keen mind-gamer. "He was like, 'Where you gonna put it, where you gonna put it?'" laughs the midfielder. "But no nerves here."

Never in doubt. Frempong coolly strokes it home and that big victory is agonisingly close – but LFB conjure one more chance. There's a foul near Grenfell's box, and Wilson is at it again. "It was inside!" yells the keeper, having raced half the field to remonstrate. "Well," he smiles at the Grenfell bench, "sometimes you can get in their heads."

It's not his or LFB's day. The set-piece sails over, and there's a rush of relief as Grenfell win. Hugs and handshakes all round – even from the seething Barry – then presentations, photos and peri-peri rather than pints. "We should do this every year," urges LFB scorer Fenton, as players, fans and families mingle.

As the last stragglers leave, Taylor debriefs with *FFT* while wrangling his kids – yep, there's another Rupert. Then opposite number Bryant strides over, before heading back to work.

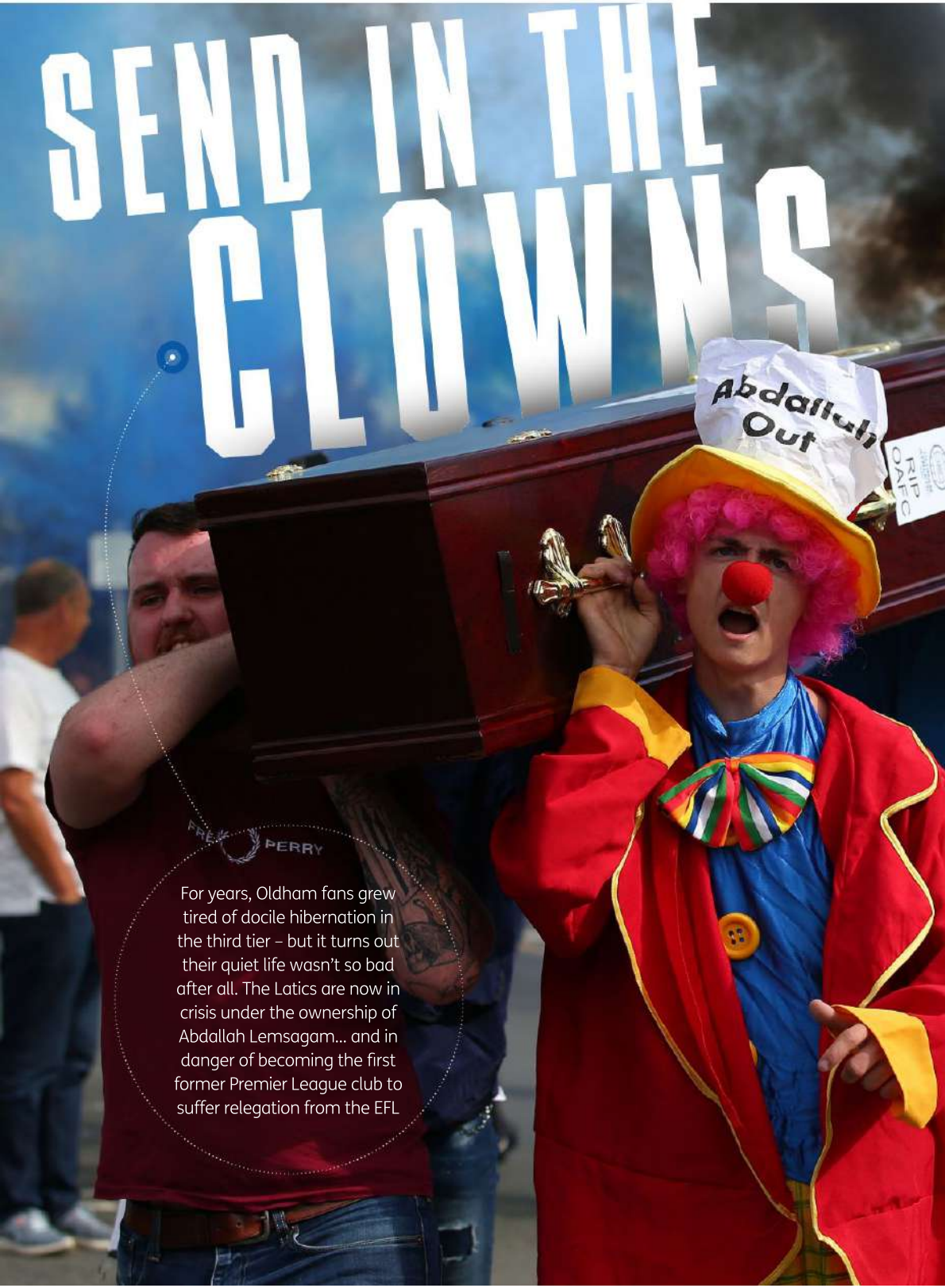
They exchange a handshake for a job well done, which morphs into a hug. There's just one thing left to say. "What a day," smiles the LFB co-manager, "that was never a penalty." Taylor grins back. "And your goal was offside."

This one could run and run.

GRENFELL UNITED

GRENFELL UNITED
FOREVER IN OUR HEARTS

SEND IN THE CLOWNS



For years, Oldham fans grew tired of docile hibernation in the third tier – but it turns out their quiet life wasn't so bad after all. The Latics are now in crisis under the ownership of Abdallah Lemsagam... and in danger of becoming the first former Premier League club to suffer relegation from the EFL

Words Huw Davies

Quick, name all 50 Premier League clubs since the start of 1992-93. You forgot about Oldham, right? Guessing the 72 current Football League teams would likely bring the same result. Still, most Latics probably didn't care if outsiders had forgotten them... until now.

In 1990, Oldham Athletic reached the League Cup final and FA Cup semis under Joe Royle, drawing 3-3 with Manchester United before losing the replay in extra time. A year later, they played top-flight football for the first time since 1923. Today, Royle's name adorns Boundary Park's North Stand with unfortunate irony, as it's emblematic to fans of what's tearing the club apart – but more on that later. In the intervening three decades, the Latics' gradual decline went largely unnoticed, until a soporific existence was enlivened in the worst way.

Now outsiders *are* paying attention, as they would when matches are interrupted by pitch invasions, tennis balls, aeroplane banners and coffins outside the ground. As Oldham flirt provocatively with a first ever plummet to non-league, fans are publicising their plight under Abdallah Lemsagam's ownership. Obscurity is no longer an option.

"It's easier to keep believing that the club is fine, but it's not," says Matt Dean, host of *The Boundary Park Alert System!* podcast. "The situation now is an accumulation of the apathy that's rotted the club. I was there when we won the Division Two title, and at Wembley to see the League Cup final, and at Maine Road to play United – but that was 30 years ago. I'm sick of talking about it."

How did we get here?

UNCOMFORTABLY NUMB

In most tales, dizzying highs become dismal lows. Oldham's fall was less dramatic: Icarus just got a bit tired and gradually lost altitude until he rested on the ocean floor.

There are 92 League clubs, and the other 91 have celebrated a trophy or promotion more recently than Oldham. In more than 30 years without either, the Latics have graced the top half of a division – any division – on six occasions, and the play-offs only twice. They spent 21 campaigns lodged in the third tier like a grape in the trachea.

It's a sensation closer to numbness than pain. We think of relegations as the nadir, but at least those provide memories, drama and fleeting hope before the heartbreak. What do you feel during consecutive League One finishes of 16th, 17th, 16th, 19th, 15th, 15th, 17th and 17th? What is there to feel?

"You judge it by games, not seasons," says Steve Shipman of independent supporters' group Push The Boundary. "You don't know what success feels like. So, when people say now that [the unrest] is about results, it isn't, because it's never been about results."

"There has to be something that helps to keep you going, doesn't there?" asks Dean, half-rhetorically, half-desperately. "We've had the odd game – beating Liverpool in the FA Cup, then taking Everton to a Goodison Park replay [both in 2013], plus coming from 3-0 down to beat Peterborough 5-4 in 2014 – but that's not enough. Everything else blurs into, 'Remember him? We had him for a while. He came, did nothing, then went'. You have this litany of players you forget."

It wasn't their first mortgage in a division: Oldham were in the second tier continuously from 1974 to 1991, only once reaching the top six before eventually going up. The 2010s, however, were desperate. Dean continues: "You need imaginative people to engage the fanbase; to look at the product on the pitch and say, 'This isn't very good – how do we keep people coming back?' Without that, the whole thing becomes duller. You know what to expect – lower-mid-table – and it doesn't inspire. It's such hard work to follow football at that level without any expectation of ever achieving anything."

League One mediocrity resembles sunlit uplands these days. In 2018, Oldham were relegated and quickly made themselves at home in the basement tier. Now they face eviction from it.

"If you're a young supporter who has stuck around, you deserve some credit," says Dean, laughing bitterly. "People said things can't get any worse. Typical Oldham: it got worse."

Abdallah Lemsagam arrived at Boundary Park during 2017-18's relegation campaign. He took over in January, though Lemsagam claims he was putting money into the club before then to cover unpaid wages (Oldham denied *The Athletic*'s reports that he provided £48,000 in a plastic bag full of £20 notes). While the Moroccan wasn't officially behind 2017's late-summer spending spree, the profiles of Oldham's signings implied some influence: ex-Ajax winger Queensy Menig and Haiti captain Johny Placide certainly weren't ▸

raised on hotpot. Nantes loanee Menig was allegedly pocketing nearly £12,000 per week, five times the Manchester side's next-highest salary, which even his 90th-minute winner against Blackburn couldn't justify.

For fans who have been singing/tolerating *Mouldy Old Dough* since the early '70s, shiny new dough was a novelty. But any optimism was short-lived, as Oldham went down while Lemsagam discovered further holes in the finances. A previous arrangement regarding the North Stand means that any matchday bar revenue goes to ex-Latics owner Simon Blitz, on top of the club's rent payments for the 13,500-capacity ground.

"The North Stand has the function room, so Blitz receives the revenue from any events happening Monday-Friday," adds Shipman. "Also, for two years the club hasn't signed the Service Level Agreement that covers details such as the cost of matchday food, because they don't like the terms of it. So any money taken from the fans' bar goes to Blitz, not the club, as there's no agreement in place. The stand was shut completely for 18 months."

Meanwhile, managers came and went with alarming regularity. Richie Wellens, who had succeeded John Sheridan in 2017-18, was replaced by Frankie Bunn, who made way for Paul Scholes, whose resignation by text gave Pete Wild a second spell in charge before he too walked away.

Whether or not Scholes should have known what he was walking into – the Latics won a subsequent employment tribunal, with an arbitrator refuting Scholes' claims of owner interference – it was concerning to see Wild, a lifelong Oldham supporter, choose to leave. Caretaking between Bunn and Scholes, the 33-year-old youth coach oversaw a famous cup win at top-flight Fulham and prophesied, "The fairytale will come to an end at some point." Sadly, he was right.

Lemsagam looked overseas. French coach Laurent Banide became his fifth appointment and Oldham's first from outside the UK and Ireland, followed by Dino Maamria (Tunisia) and Harry Kewell (Australia). Current gaffer Keith Curle was the eighth manager in four and a half years. Rapid staff turnover extends behind the scenes, from doctors to directors.

The playing squad is in a state of perpetual flux. During Lemsagam's seven full transfer windows, Oldham have bought five players, taken 28 on loan and picked up another 52 on free transfers – 85 signings in all. If one includes the pre-takeover deals he may have funded, that rises to 96 arrivals. In four years.

Oldham aren't picky. They've signed young players and old ones; top-flight loanees and lower-league staples; part-time hopefuls and ex-Premier League warhorses. Footballers have been snared everywhere from Adelaide to Wrexham, Sofia to Salford, the UAE to Pontefract Colleries. A few stick around. Most don't. Nine of the 63 'permanent' recruits – one in seven – were released after fewer than half a dozen appearances in all competitions. Callum Dolan, 18, left just days after making a 15-minute debut as Oldham beat Liverpool Under-23s, because he was spotted texting while driving to training, while disqualified, and reacted by embarking on a 98mph police chase, running a red light at 72mph before attempting to flee on foot.

"One player entered folklore: Urko Vera," recalls Shipman. "At a fans' forum, Abdallah said, 'What's the problem with Urko Vera?' Everybody in the room shouted, 'He's s**t!'" A debate over who wanted Vera – Lemsagam or manager Banide – ended with the owner offering to give a supporter Banide's phone number, to ask him.

"Sohny Sefil was another," says Shipman. "We sent him on loan to Ashton United, and after only three games they sent him back." Jonathan Benteke, Christian's brother, also arrived – twice. "Everybody knew he wasn't up to it and we released him. Suddenly we signed him again the next season. Then we released him again."

Oldham: land of opportunity.

"JUST GO, YOU PILLOCKS"

Falling out of League Two takes effort. There are just two relegation spots, and usually one team in existential crisis. Yet, as non-league clubs driven by cash or competence come up and consolidate, historic members are losing

"IF YOU'RE A YOUNG FAN WHO'S STUCK AROUND, YOU NEED SOME CREDIT. PEOPLE SAID IT CAN'T GET ANY WORSE. IT GOT WORSE"

their Football League status for the first time. Hartlepool and Leyton Orient both lost theirs in 2017; Chesterfield followed in 2018; Notts County, the oldest of all, went down in 2019; Bury fared far worse in 2020, and 2021 was Southend's turn. Now 2022 is eyeing Oldham.

On the day 500 fans march a clown-borne coffin to Boundary Park, followed by a Grim Reaper and black flares (smoke, not trousers), the Latics sit bottom of the Football League:

Below Oldham fans make their feelings clear, as "the worst team we've ever had" watch on edgily

P7 W1 L6. "This is the worst team we've ever had," Dean tells *FFT* as a plane flies overhead, its banner urging Lemsagam to sell up.

Match tickets are inexplicably unavailable; supporters without season tickets are refused entry. "They announced this only the previous evening, via social media," explains Shipman. "Older generations don't use social media, so they arrived to pay on the day as normal and were turned away." A hastily-made placard proclaims, 'FAN SINCE 1963 – NEVER LOCKED OUT BEFORE! JUST GO, YOU PILLOCKS!' Closed bars leave 950 visiting Hartlepool fans thirsty and Oldham's coffers hungry.

It wasn't this season's first snafu. The Latics suspended ticket sales for their trip to Leyton Orient, only for the hosts to welcome Oldham supporters and their banners, banned from Boundary Park. The club's suspicion towards supposed troublemakers was excessive but not totally misplaced: there had been a pitch invasion against Colchester and a deluge of tennis balls against Accrington. A 3-0 defeat to Barrow was interrupted by fans taking the field. "It's not acceptable," raged Lemsagam. "Adults are encouraging kids to break the law." Director Adam Morallee went further: "What fans are trying to do is kill the club."

These are the battle lines. Ensuing protests have been lawful but supporters' ire remains, especially after Morallee's moralising.

"We've had two winding-up petitions since Abdallah came in," continues Shipman. "The Trust owns three per cent of shares but that's worthless under this regime. It's supposed to give you access to accounts and information from within the club, but we've not been told when managers are sacked or accounts will be filed late. There was a Q&A at the start of 2020 and we got wind that he wasn't paying the rent. Somebody asked, 'Can Blitz put the club into administration?' and Abdallah said, 'Tell him to try'." Two months later, Blitz had the club in court, paying north of half a million pounds in overdue rent and unsettled debts in order to ward off administration.

Players have suffered. Wages were paid late on up to a dozen occasions between February 2018 and March 2020. Peter Clarke – "a true professional," says Dean – endured relegation twice in the same season, with Oldham and on loan at Bury, but returned to Oldham, won Player of the Season for the second time in three years and was released because he was 37. He duly moved up a division at Fleetwood. Jack Byrne alleged that he was suspended and demoted for a tackle in training, then suspended again for tweeting a clown emoji at a funfair because the club believed it was aimed at them.

And then there's David Wheater. He claims the club, trying to force him out, packed him off to the youth team with a 70 per cent pay cut while misleading supporters (when they tweeted that he had a back injury sustained lifting his dog, Wheater replied saying he was available). Recounting his experience of one youth-team encounter to *Undr The Cosh*, the former top-flight defender said, "The kit was too small, then one of the coaches told me, 'They're making you warm up, but you can't play'. Then the CEO went on a podcast and said I'd refused to play because the 3G pitch would be bad for my back. The game was on grass, and I trained on 3G every day with the youth team! I couldn't believe it.

"I'd moved [to Teesside] and they forced me to go back to Manchester, to be closer. They said it was hampering my footballing ability, but I wasn't allowed to play. They emailed me on a Thursday and I opened it on the Friday; it said, 'If you aren't in the north-west by 4pm Monday, we'll start disciplinary proceedings'. This was in the middle of a pandemic. I was living with my wife and kids. Luckily, my mate had a house he was renovating, so I headed straight there."

FFT put these allegations and this story to Oldham, but the club declined to comment.

Back in the present, Oldham draw 0-0 at home to Hartlepool. Curle jokes that he'll ask Lemsagam if he can make up the numbers in the League Cup on Tuesday night. Naming just four substitutes, none of them the owner, the Latics face Brentford's B team in front of 599 travelling fans. They lose 7-0.

"I MAKE A LOT OF MISTAKES"

After Oldham's first League Two campaign, Lemsagam released the smash hit 'Vision & Plan 2019-2022', which read:

"To play entertaining football in the Oldham Athletic tradition – fast-paced and technically good quality." Every club optimistically claims this tradition, but last term Oldham did score the second-most goals in League Two... and conceded 12 more than anybody else. "We came 18th," sighs Dean. "It was hard to buy into, because we weren't making the most of this rare goalscoring prowess. It would have been a fluke – Conor McAleny just had one of those inspired seasons – but it should have been our promotion push."

McAleny joined Oldham aged 28, with 28 senior goals, and plundered 21 in one season before leaving for Salford.

"It'll be delivered by developing talent in the academy, a Europe-wide recruitment system and excellent coaching and management." Since Lee Johnson left in February 2015, no boss has reached 50 matches with Oldham, and academy success George Edmundson pre-dated Lemsagam. "We sold Tom Hamer for £30,000," adds Dean. "He's getting rave reviews at Burton now. For £30,000, and what we invested in him through the youth system, we've probably lost money on him."

"ABDALLAH ASKED, 'WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH URKO VERA? ALL THE FANS YELLED, 'HE'S S**T'"

The 'Europe-wide recruitment system' has picked up players from afar... or has it? "Dylan Bahamboula is possibly one of the league's best players," raves Shipman. "At first people were saying, 'Oh God, who's this guy we've signed from Bulgaria?' But we dug into it and he'd actually been on trial at Swindon before we got him, so it's not as if we'd sniffed him out in Europe."

"To try to achieve League One status within three years... Championship football is best considered as realistic within a five-year plan rather than the short term." Reaching the second tier could happen... if Oldham survive this term and win back-to-back promotions.

"Stabilise the club, financially and in football terms." It's still here, at least.

Lemsagam's SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) listed the supporters' commitment as a strength. He's experiencing it now. Repeated criticism of his predecessors is understandable. He's invested vast sums to fix holes, only to find new ones – or create them. "I don't say I'm the best owner," he admitted in September. "I make a lot of mistakes. I learn from them."

Though they fear a growing stubbornness, most fans would charge Lemsagam with incompetence, not malevolence. He's human. His brother Mohamed, responsible as sporting director for the myriad transfer deals, joined Abdallah at a Q&A and asked fans, "Why are you so aggressive? I don't understand." The reaction answered his question: it's *because* he doesn't understand. When Mohamed said he thought he'd done "a really good job", only to hear laughter, he looked genuinely hurt.

Abdallah knows he's unpopular, but attends fan forums anyway. Oldham season tickets, discounted after the pandemic, are among the Football League's cheapest. Any bought post-relegation came with a free scarf (many were returned in protest). The North Stand became The Joe Royle Stand, and fans chose a new club crest. It's supporter engagement.

But gestures aren't enough. In this struggle for Oldham's soul and status, fans demand results, on and off the pitch. In their heyday, the Latics ended the Premier League's debut 1992-93 season with three victories in a week to dodge the drop on goal difference. Maybe new saviours will rise.

If so, lessons have to be learned. It seems telling that Oldham's redesigned logo doesn't feature the club motto. Now more than ever, they must dare to be wise.

Above Scholes quit by text after seven games at the helm
Below The Latics' plight is no longer a laughing matter

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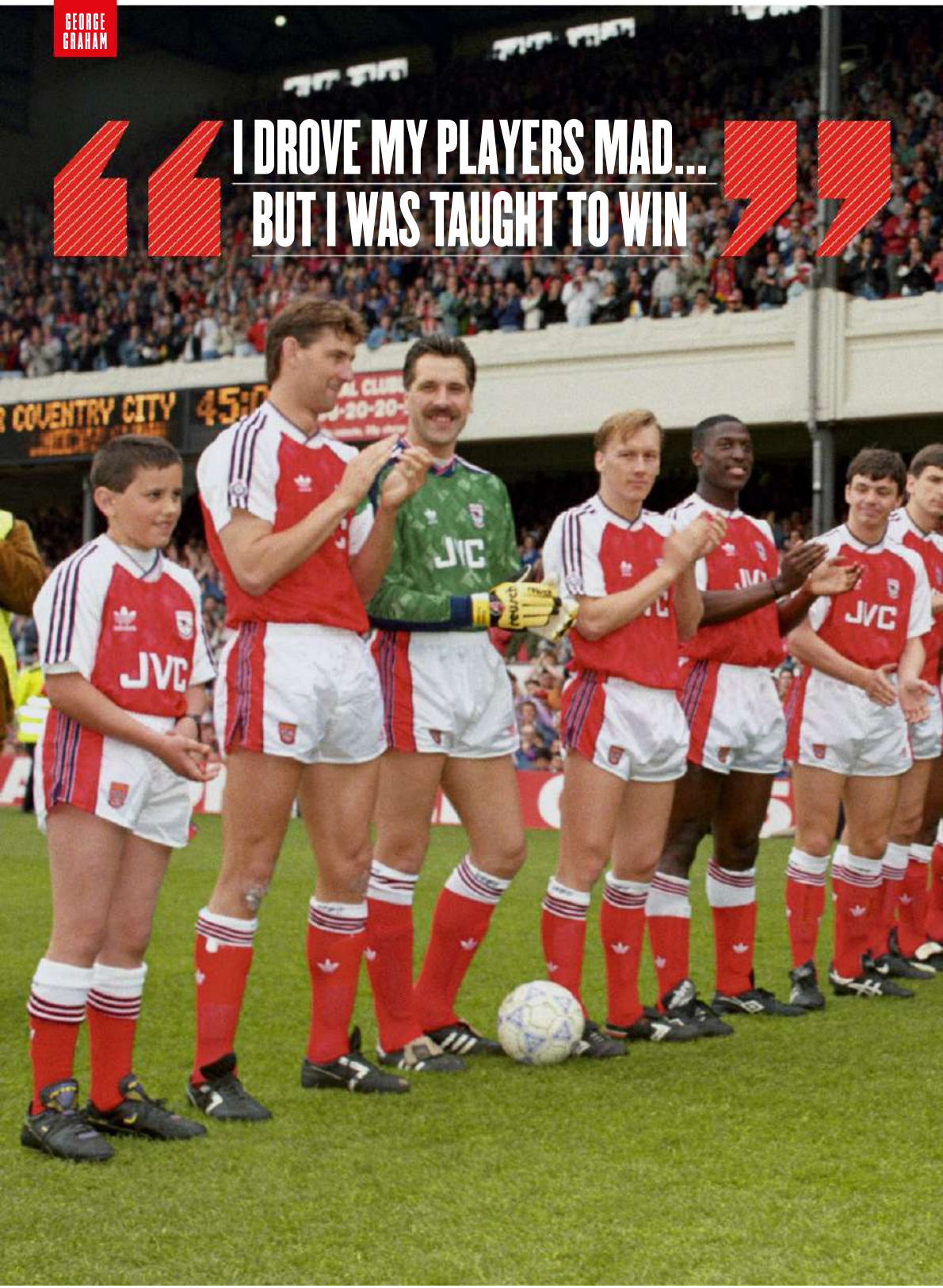
“I DROVE MY PLAYERS MAD... BUT I WAS TAUGHT TO WIN”



George Graham drilled his famous back four to the brink of insanity at Arsenal, but in doing so transformed an ailing club forever. Thirty-five years on from his Highbury arrival, the Scot walks *FFT* back through an unforgettable era of change, last-gasp titles... and tanning with El Tel

Words Arthur Renard

George Graham is about to leave his local café in Hampstead when he comes across an old acquaintance. *FourFourTwo* have just finished up a pleasant cuppa with the Arsenal great in north London, but we're not the only ones interested in having a chat this afternoon. "They need you back, George," says his pal glumly, with a grave shake of the head.

Although it's fairly obvious that the Scot, now 76, won't be returning to his spot in the dugout, the sentiments are clear. They're also shared widely among Gooners. Graham's managerial style – one that made his Highbury heroes champions of England twice, with three more domestic trophies and even some historic success on the continent – is still appreciated by supporters who believe their team could benefit from his kind of astute guidance. For the modern-day Arsenal, those darker arts of solidity and dastardly defending have often been forgotten to great cost.

Graham, neatly dressed as during his managerial days, nods politely.

"My priority was: don't lose a goal, do not concede," he had told *FFT* shortly before. "That was my policy, and I think I drove the players mad with it.

"I never stopped working and the players would start to get the ▸

idea as well, like, 'I've got to sweat here'. If you ever speak to any players of mine, they would say, 'George was a right pain in the backside, because he kept on the same stuff every morning – he drove me mad'. But eventually they did it on their own... and then I didn't have to coach them."

Indeed, so well-drilled were his miserly side that Arsenal's rearguard quickly became a proper noun in themselves. They weren't just *a* back four – they were The Back Four. They were the bedrock of Graham's stellar success in north London, before providing the foundations for a previously unknown Frenchman to develop his work and then revolutionise English football in later years.

Simply, Arsenal would not be the same Arsenal without George Graham. For this self-made Scot, it was quite the ride...

"WE CAN TALK ABOUT STYLE AFTER WE WIN"

Most of Graham's characteristics as a boss can be traced back to his tough upbringing in Bargeddie, near Glasgow, where he grew up with six siblings and single mother.

His father passed away with tuberculosis when he was only three and a half weeks old – the same disease one of his sisters would tragically die of several years later.

"I come from a very poor working-class background," he tells *FFT*. "You had to fight for everything – anything you got, you had to earn it. That's why I always told players, 'If you're gifted, make sure you maximise it as much as possible – don't waste it'."

Given his own background, Graham worked especially hard to assemble squads of players who shared his desire to graft.

"Passion is a great word for me," he says. "Someone might not have been the greatest player, but I could pick him because of the way he approached his job. When you come from a poor background, you've got to work, you've got to improve, and you've got to get better all the time. This was very influential for me. I'm sure all of the players I worked with thought, 'My God, he's tough', because I worked them, and I worked them, and then I worked them some more. Eventually, they knew exactly how we were going to play.

"The basis of anything you do is to start at the bottom," continues Graham, in reference to his famous backline. "When you design a building, you just don't start at the top – you start at the bottom. In football, you build from the back; you do the foundations and then work your way up. A lot of people want to start halfway – they don't want to do the filthy, crap stuff."

In his view, you pleased the crowd by giving them exactly what they wanted: results.

"I ask people within the sporting world, 'Do you want to win, or do you want to entertain without winning?'" says Graham. "Personally, I was always taught to win. Then we can talk about the style after we do that."

When Graham was 15 years old, he left his family home and moved south of the border to play for Aston Villa. "Those are memories I'll never forget," he smiles. "I was playing at Wembley, for Scotland Schoolboys against

England, and there were 73,000 fans there. I've still got the programme."

Indeed, Graham appears to be a keen collector of football memorabilia. Among others, he has the programme of the first Arsenal match at Highbury in 1913, and Gunners cartoon postcards dating from 1904. The Scot also has plenty of souvenirs from his own career, in which his time at Villa was followed by two eventful years at Chelsea.

"I finished up as top goalscorer and played centre-forward," says Graham, of what he considers his best season as a 19-year-old at Stamford Bridge, in 1965-66. "But later on I started to play in midfield, because I didn't have the pace and wasn't the most physical. I was pretty good in the air, I could see things and was always good with the ball, but I just didn't have speed."

Graham is modest when looking back at his time on the pitch, but he turned out over 300 times for Arsenal and won the Double with them in 1971, before winding down his career with Manchester United, Portsmouth, Crystal Palace and the California Surf.

"I did OK at Arsenal and had a good career as a player, but as a manager I wouldn't have picked myself as a player," he admits with typical ruthlessness – though perhaps not so surprisingly given his nickname of 'Stroller' at Highbury. Graham eventually broke his leg while playing for Palace, but rather than lick his wounds, it merely nudged him in a new direction within football. Terry Venables, with whom he'd struck up a friendship from his Chelsea playing days, was by then in charge at Selhurst Park and made him an offer.

"Terry told me, 'You're at a certain age now, you've just broken your leg and can't do anything – would you like to coach the kids in the youth team?'" recalls Graham.

He'd already started to think about life after football and had even started working in Frank McLintock's London boozer, but Venables' offer was too good to turn down. Soon, he realised how much he liked it.

"I took to that like a duck to water," says Graham. "I simply loved it and couldn't get enough. I used to watch Terry with the first team, picking up ideas. He was excellent. When he went to QPR [in 1980], I went with him as a youth coach again. It opened me up to another success in my career."

Two years later, in 1982, Graham was appointed as manager of Millwall, who were then fighting relegation from the old Third Division. It was another significant step in his managerial development.

"I went from coaching the kids to men and that pushed me on – I started really believing in myself," he admits.

Soon, everybody else in football did too.

Below left His grit got results **Bottom left** Wee George showed skill at Chelsea **Bottom right** Tel before 'El'

ARSENAL WON THE LEAGUE CUP IN GRAHAM'S MAIDEN SEASON, THE CLUB'S FIRST TROPHY FOR EIGHT YEARS

TWO OUT OF FOUR AIN'T BAD

Graham's friendship with Venables runs like a common thread throughout his career. The former England manager was best man at his first wedding, and when Venables moved to Barcelona, they soon linked up again.

"I remember being knocked out of the FA Cup in an early round with Millwall when Terry said to me, 'Come over and train with us'. I just took a week off and went over to Spain. I trained every day with Terry and his Barcelona team – it was such a relaxed week... mainly because nobody in England knew I was there!"

Graham watched on and soaked up the experience, with his footballing knowledge even expanding at night. "Every evening after training we'd go and have dinner, where we would just sit and talk football," remembers Graham. "Terry was called 'Mister Terry' in Barcelona, and everywhere we went it was like, 'Ah, Mister Terry, Mister Terry... come and sit here, what would you like to drink?' He never had to pay. If he tried, they went, 'No, no, no, Mister Terry, I'll bring drinks for you'. That was the whole week."

Graham didn't let anybody at Millwall know about his little trip. "I must have asked my assistant to lead training that week," he grins. "Nobody knew I'd been in Spain – although they might have noticed that I had a nice tan when I returned..."

People at the club wouldn't have minded anyway, since Graham was delivering as manager at The Den. After arriving halfway through the 1982-83 season, he kept them in the Third Division and two years later won promotion to the second tier, where a young Teddy Sheringham made his breakthrough.

His work clearly impressed Arsenal anyway, who after reported flirtations with both Alex Ferguson and his good mate Venables, hired Graham in the summer of 1986 – 15 years on from their last league title, achieved when he was still a player.

As at Millwall, he had to work with a limited budget, since the Gunners found themselves in a precarious financial situation.

"It was always going to be hard, but I knew about the best players in the lower leagues," he reflects. "I scouted them on their passion, like whether they had great willpower to win. That's the mentality I managed to get into those Arsenal teams."

Graham did much of the scouting himself, and had a unique way of going about it. To scour the country for hidden gems, he would ask his secretary to collect local papers from up and down the country on a weekly basis.

"Now, in those papers there would usually be a column written by a local journalist who would be really close to the manager," says Graham. "So by reading that article, I knew what was going on at all those clubs. That's how I picked up on Lee Dixon. He won player of the year at Stoke, so I thought, 'He must be a good player'. Then I went to see Stoke, and who did I spot who was outstanding as well? Stevie Bould! I thought, 'Wow, that's two of my back four already!'"

Amid his financial constraints, Graham was a merciless negotiator.

"We met at Watford Gap service station, on the M1 between Stoke and London," he remembers of his meeting with Dixon. "We chatted for ages and eventually discussed wages, but we just couldn't agree a number. In the end I said, 'Lee, I really appreciate you coming to meet me here on the motorway, but we're not getting anywhere so let's leave it. But thank you very much for coming to see me'. When I walked back towards my car, all of a sudden I heard, 'George, Geeeeooorge... OK, I'll accept!' This was right in the middle of a service station..."

Yet, there were other challenges, too, not least in reaffirming to Arsenal's suffering fans that they were on the right track.

"I got a lot of letters from supporters that said, 'Why are we buying all of these players from the lower divisions? What's your thinking here? They're not up to our quality'."

By then, Graham had already been busy in the market. Six months before netting Dixon, he'd acquired three more players who would prove to be hits at Highbury.

"I bought Nigel Winterburn at Wimbledon, Kevin Richardson from Watford and Alan Smith from Leicester, who'd just gone down," he says. "The club was saving lots of money."

In his first season in N5, Graham won the Gunners' first trophy for eight years with a 2-1 League Cup final triumph against Liverpool. Having not finished above sixth in the league

for four seasons running, his new Arsenal side even topped the table in early January, before slipping in the New Year to finally finish fourth.

Graham's team was rapidly improving, however, and his crafty recruitment was supplemented by some homegrown heroes – not least Tony Adams, who immediately became a first-team regular at 19. After leaking 47, 49, 60 and 56 goals respectively in those four seasons prior to the Scot's arrival, Arsenal shipped just 35 in his maiden campaign. Forging such resilience, though, didn't come easily.

"It was non-stop, unbelievable," grimaces Graham of his punishing training regime. "I used to get the youth team out to play the back four, plus a midfielder. The kids would be in possession all the time so my defenders would have to move as a unit, from one side to the other. I refused to let them go in the 18-yard box, because David Seaman would be there." As a result, opposition attackers soon became familiar with the unmistakable flutter of a linesman's flag.

Graham, perched in a chair outside the café with a cappuccino, illustrates exactly how it looked on the pitch with a pen and paper. Drawing lines and arrows, he shows *FFT* how his teams would make the pitch bigger when they had the ball, and smaller whenever the opposition gained possession.

"We always played in an arc, so the two centre-halves would be organising the offside all the time," he explains, pushing his 2D full-backs forward. "When we had the ball, Lee Dixon would make a run and then the back four became a back three, so then they had to adjust."

He might be nudging beyond his mid-70s now, but the manager within Graham still burns brightly. Now we know how Adams & Co must have felt...

"AFTER ANFIELD? I WENT TO PLAY GOLF..."

Graham's team may have flourished with four at the back, but the Gunners chief wasn't averse to changing his strategy when the circumstances dictated – just as he did when his team approached arguably the biggest game in their history at Anfield on May 26, 1989.

On the final day of an emotional season, his men trailed Liverpool by three points and knew that only a victory by two goals would land them the title. Despite the harrowing events of Hillsborough several weeks earlier, the hosts were big favourites after Arsenal gained just a point from their last two home games against Derby and Wimbledon. But all that did was channel a focus for Arsenal.

"Nobody fancied us," remembers Graham. "Everybody was talking about how we'd thrown it away and all that. I just thought, 'Lovely, let's go. Let's go'.

"I told the players, 'Look, if it's goalless at half-time, don't worry. Everybody wants us to attack, but leave it as late as possible. Get in at half-time with 0-0 and I'll be delighted'. The last thing I said to them before the game started was, 'I think we'll score three goals tonight. Because if we score one goal, they'll try to attack us more and we'll get another two'."

What he didn't realise, or certainly didn't tell his players, was that Liverpool hadn't lost a league match at Anfield by two goals for three years. So, to prevent the Merseysiders from playing their typically attacking game, Graham decided to switch things up.

"I changed the formation to three players at the back, as I wanted to change Liverpool's style of play," he recalls. "Everybody thought we were playing five, but we weren't. Their wingers were their main source of goals, so I pushed my full-backs forward to mark them high up the pitch, before they could receive the ball. Their goalkeeper had to kick it long all the time and our central defenders were at least six feet tall, so we were winning all of the headers..."

Graham's plan worked out almost exactly as he envisaged, though even he wouldn't have quite predicted the bedlam to come. Alan Smith gave the visitors a crucial lead just after the interval, but Arsenal's second goal wouldn't come. Even Graham started to think it was a bridge too far during the final minutes of the game.

"I was already thinking what I'd tell the media, saying something like, 'Well, we tried our best, we won 1-0, but still it wasn't good enough'," he smiles. "So I was thinking about that, then suddenly Michael Thomas scored the second for us!"

While his Arsenal players celebrated wildly, Graham somehow seemed to keep his composure. "I kept my cool, but really I didn't – I acted it," he laughs at the memory, over 32 years later.

More revelry followed that night as the Arsenal team continued the party in London – but one man wasn't with them. "My son picked me up and we travelled to Scotland," says Graham. "Because I knew the press would be chasing me, I went up there the next day and played golf."

Above The 'show us yer medals' brigade were quite satisfied **Below** Adams grew under Graham, who signed Wright in '91

So there the Arsenal boss was, on some vast green fields in the middle of nowhere, mere hours after masterminding one of the finest victories in English football history. Nobody knew where he was – although one person nearly found out when Graham entered the clubhouse afterwards.

"We got some tea and sandwiches when the guy who served us said, 'Excuse me, I watched a game of football last night and you look like one of the guys who was on the bench'. I just laughed and said, 'You know, a lot of people say that!'"

To outsiders, that loony night at Anfield is the obvious highlight of Graham's career, but the man himself points to another memorable finale – in Copenhagen in 1994 – which

"EVERYONE WAS TALKING ABOUT HOW WE HAD THROWN IT AWAY. I THOUGHT, 'LOVELY, LET'S GO'"

comes close. Having helped Arsenal to their maiden European trophy in 1970 as a player [the Fairs Cup], he then guided them to their second as manager. Twenty-four years after that first success on the continent, Graham's Gunners beat Parma – they of Zola, Asprilla, Brolin and more – in a star-studded European Cup Winners' Cup final.

"Half of their team were World Cup players, they were fabulous," says Graham. "And we also beat Paris Saint-Germain in the semis. I don't think people realised how special that achievement was, but that didn't bother me. The only thing which bothered me was that we were playing the way we were practising every day in training."

Graham is also still proud of the special camaraderie that grew among his players – immortalised by the so-called Tuesday Club, where several Arsenal players bonded over lengthy sessions in the pub after training (Graham would usually give his squad a day off on Wednesdays). The drinking sessions were heavy, which the former manager says he was never fully aware of and certainly wouldn't have encouraged.

"I probably would have done something about it if I'd known more," he says.

Things spiralled out of control when Adams was sent to prison for drink-driving in 1991, while Paul Merson battled his own demons in later years.

Arsenal still scooped the title in 1990-91, losing only one match, conceding just 18 goals. Graham's second championship at Highbury was to be his last, but the Gunners burnished their trophy cabinet with both the FA and League Cups during an odd 1992-93 campaign where they finished 10th.

It had been a glorious era for the club – but like all good things, an end was inevitable.

OVER AND OUT

The final chapter did not befit the legacy. Graham was relieved of his duties in 1995 after it was discovered that he'd accepted a payment from an agent following the acquisitions of Scandi duo John Jensen and Pal Lydersen. Although Graham paid back the money and explained that it was an "unsolicited gift", Arsenal dismissed him anyway. It's an episode which lies in the past for the Scot, who would rather not revisit it with *FFT* now.

The year he spent out of football serving an FA ban was "tough", but Graham soon rediscovered the joy of management in 1996 when he was appointed to replace Howard Wilkinson at Leeds. In his first full campaign the Whites finished fifth and qualified for the UEFA Cup, and he holds fond memories of his time at Elland Road.

"I loved it up there, I really enjoyed it in Yorkshire – it's a lovely place," says Graham.

His old scouting methods still served him well, too. This time he signed striker Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink for £2 million, who would go on to enjoy a prolific career in England.

"I told my main scout Ian McNeill to look at several countries abroad and work out who ▸

the leading goalscorers were," says Graham. "Jimmy, who played for Boavista in Portugal, was one of them. So I went to see him there. I watched every player I bought, because I had to see them myself. But the game has changed – nowadays, they have recruitment specialists who will recommend numerous players to the manager."

Although things went well at Elland Road, Graham returned to London after two years – he was marrying again and wanted to be around the capital to settle. So, after Spurs paid a compensation fee in October 1998, the former Gunner made a brave decision to move back south with his old club's enemy.

"I knew Tottenham could be a big club as they were underachieving," says Graham. "I actually enjoyed my time at Spurs, even though I got a lot of criticism."

That was mainly because of his past at Arsenal, which made it difficult for him to be fully embraced at White Hart Lane. The fact remains, however, that only two Tottenham bosses have won trophies in the last three decades: Juande Ramos in 2008, following Graham in 1999. Just five months after the Scot's arrival, Allan Nielsen's late header secured League Cup triumph over Leicester under the Twin Towers.

"I WAS JUST TALKING ABOUT NEEDING A FEW NEW PLAYERS – AND THEN THEY SACKED ME"

There was one major reason why the job became difficult for Graham to continue at Tottenham – and in fact, ever since in football. A diagnosis for rheumatoid arthritis sounded the death knell on his coaching career.

"I broke down in training one day and they took me straight to hospital, where I stayed for a week," he remembers. "The rheumatism goes via your joints, and it was going in my knees and ankles. It made me tired while doing coaching sessions, which was something I really loved about the job."

Graham explains that he was advised to retire from management. "But it didn't matter," he chuckles with self-deprecating humour. "They sacked me anyway."

Spurs accused him of a breach of contract after he made comments about the club's financial position, but the North Lanarkshire native believes it had more to do with results which weren't so hot at the time.

"I was just speaking in a press conference about the need to sign a few players, but that there were limited funds available," he reflects. "And then they sacked me, because they said that I was revealing confidential decisions from the board. It was incredibly embarrassing. The PFA took up my case and helped me to get compensation. Managers say things about selling or buying players all the time, but with me it happened in a period when the results weren't

going too well. If they'd been going all right, I could have said anything."

But Graham knew it would be challenging to continue as a manager anyway, due to his ailing health. He admits that he wasn't really approached for other jobs after Tottenham.

"I think most people knew I was struggling illness-wise," he concedes. "I was told that my arthritis wouldn't go away quickly."

Since then Graham's health has thankfully improved, with retirement and his weekly treatment helping to suppress the condition. He says that he hasn't been involved in any footballing role for the last 20 years, and admits that he's missed the game at times.

"You miss the buzz, the excitement and the challenge," he says. "Of course you miss it – but that's life, isn't it?"

ONCE A GOONER

Graham still attends games now and then, though – mostly at Arsenal, where he only needs to phone the club for tickets in the directors' box. Having served the Gunners admirably both as a player and manager, he still gets his place among the executives – something he was already used to during his coaching days at Highbury.

Above left Graham loved Leeds, before his assistant David O'Leary took charge **Top left** "I know you said there's no cash for players, but..." **Top right** Graham's gripes ended badly

"Because the dugout in the stadium was so low, you had to stand up when somebody was attacking," he smiles. "So that's when I started to watch the first half of matches in the directors' box, taking notes before I'd go down. When I went in at half-time to speak to the players, I'd always do it in three parts: the goalkeeper and the backline, then the midfield and forwards. Or I would just give the whole team a bollocking! But that didn't happen often, thankfully..."

One game, though, too many things went wrong for just a few notes.

"We were on television that afternoon and the camera came flashing down to me in the stand, just at the moment when I tore my notes into little pieces and chucked them up in the air – we were playing awful," laughs Graham. "All the little pieces of paper were floating around and the television caught me at that exact moment! The commentator just said, 'Well, Graham certainly isn't happy with their performance...'"

Sometimes, though, the boss didn't need to motivate his players – on the odd occasion, such drive was provided by external factors. When Arsenal travelled to Tottenham for the second leg of their League Cup semi-final in March 1987, they had to make up a 1-0 deficit from the opening match. While they were sitting in the dressing room at White Hart Lane, Graham and his players heard a Spurs official muttering over the PA system with ticket details for the Wembley final.

"When it was announced, you could hear it all over the ground," remembers Graham. "They were preparing to sell tickets for the final and the game was still on! It was a very motivational thing."

Arsenal conceded just after the hour mark, but prevailed 2-1 on the night thanks to a pair of late goals from Ian Allinson and David Rocastle, forcing a replay which the Gunners won 2-1 again. It was a monumental early episode in Graham's reign, and paved the way for that first trophy in his debut season.

They're all great memories for the Scot, who looks back with pleasure at the legacy he left behind – not only in terms of trophies, but also in the players who would win plenty more silverware in the years after his exit.

"If you look to the total club appearances of players like Bould, Adams, Winterburn and Dixon, it's unbelievable," he says. "Even after I'd left they were still winning things. Arsene Wenger recruited some magnificent players who were world class – he was the first to bring in a lot of foreign players, and with that he brought a certain way of playing. You have to give him credit for that because he did brilliantly. He's the most successful manager in Arsenal's history. The only thing is that he just stayed too long – he needed a different challenge at some point."

Although September's terrific derby victory over Spurs hinted at better things to come for the current Arsenal under Mikel Arteta, Graham believes that a little more focus on the basics still wouldn't go amiss.

"Sometimes when I've watched them in recent years, I think they've been too ahead of themselves," he admits. "They haven't had much stability at the back and they've struggled defensively. I would have made that my priority. First of all, you've got to find players who like defending. Earlier this season I saw the Liverpool-Chelsea match, where Chelsea's defending was magnificent. But you've got to do that with 11 men. Once Reece James was sent off they just sat back for the rest of the game, but they played it really well. I was very, very impressed with Thomas Tuchel that day."

It harked back to Graham's greats, and a man who served the club across two of its most successful periods in history. The Scot himself remains grateful for everything he was allowed to achieve.

"I had a wonderful career," he tells *FFT*. "As a player, winning the Double with Arsenal, playing for terrific clubs, enjoying myself and then extending it as a coach and manager – you know, it felt like a lucky thing.

"Football has been very good to me. If you see where I've come from and what I've achieved, it's phenomenal; my background, with a mother who had to work for seven kids, living in a council house. I had a decent career as a player and an even better one as a manager. I can look back now and feel proud of what I've achieved."

For Gunners everywhere, such feelings will always be mutual.

MORE ON FOURFOURTWO.COM

- What did Graham ever do for Wenger? Well, here's what... *(by Jon Spurling)*
- Football's greatest title finish? Arsenal's '89 triumph over Liverpool, as told by the players *(by Louis Massarella)*
- Why David 'Rocky' Rocastle means so much to Arsenal fans *(by Jon Spurling)*

In 1993, Marseille lifted the inaugural Champions League trophy, becoming the first – and still the only – French winners in European Cup history. For PSG they are the model to follow, just without all of the corruption, lies and treachery that made l'OM an international scandal

Words Paul Simpson

TAINTED

As soon as Abedi Pele gave him the look, Basile Boli knew exactly what to do.

"We had talked about it in training," the Olympique Marseille centre-back recalled, "and just before we walked onto the pitch in Munich, he'd told me, 'On corner kicks, don't stay at the back post – try to run and cut to the near post'. When he went to take the corner against Milan, he gave me that look. I felt as if I was the only person in the stadium."

Boli went to the near post, leapt, connected and scored. It was a moment of joy, pain (he was carrying an injury) and, as he later told French journalist Philippe Auclair, liberation. "We wanted to be called a great European club," he reflected. "For that, we needed a victory – there had been Reims [defeated in the 1956 and 1959 European Cup Finals], Saint-Etienne [in 1976] and then us in 1991. I firmly believe that Munich helped to instil confidence in the guys who won the World Cup in 1998."

Three stars of Marseille's 1-0 triumph over Milan in the first UEFA Champions League final, played at the Olympiastadion on May 26, 1993, would also feature when France lifted the World Cup on home soil five years later: Fabien Barthez, Marcel Desailly and Didier Deschamps, the captain of both sides.

L'OM had lost the 1991 European Cup Final on penalties to Red Star Belgrade, and the anguish galvanised Boli. "I'd cried more than anyone after losing in Bari," he said. "As far as I was concerned, Munich was about revenge."

They got their revenge, all right – but not without a bitter episode that led to Marseille's owner being handed a prison sentence...

THE BACKYARD BANK

Compared to the modern extravaganza, the inaugural Champions League was a modest affair. In accordance with the competition's new name, only the champions from each country competed; in contrast, more than half of the teams in this season's group stage are drawn from just four different leagues.

Back in 1992-93, knockout rounds reduced 36 clubs to two groups of four. If you topped your group, you reached the final. That was the target for Marseille, Rangers, Club Brugge and CSKA Moscow in Group A, and for Milan, IFK Gothenburg, Porto and PSV in Group B.

Walter Smith's Rangers had qualified by defeating English champions Leeds 4-2 on aggregate in a much-hyped 'Battle of Britain'. Scoring for Leeds was a recent arrival from Marseille: one Eric Cantona. In a huge upset, CSKA Moscow had eliminated the holders, Barcelona, turning a 2-0 deficit at the Camp Nou into a 3-2 win. There were few surprises in the group stage, however, and Marseille pipped Rangers by a single point (a win was worth two points back then) to set up a final against Fabio Capello's Milan – winners of all six group games, in which they had leaked just a single goal.

Marseille's victory in the final, secured with that solitary Boli strike just before half-time, came as something of a rare shock – but a far greater one was to follow. In football, as in war, all glory is fleeting, and Marseille's lost its lustre when it transpired that the club's owner and president, Bernard Tapie, had bribed Valenciennes' players to throw a Ligue 1 match six days before the final.

A few days earlier, Tapie had told l'OM midfielder Jean-Jacques Eydelie, "It's imperative you get in touch with your old Nantes team-mates at Valenciennes. We don't want them acting like idiots and breaking us before the final."

Eydelie and Jean-Pierre Bernes, Marseille's general manager, contacted Valenciennes captain Christophe Robert, defender Jacques Glassman and Argentine frontman Jorge Burruchaga. Glassman was shocked, telling his partner Audrey, "It's a crazy story. I don't know what to do. If I don't speak, I'll curse myself; if I do, no one would believe me." The other players accepted the bribe, agreeing that Robert's wife would collect the money. Later, the equivalent of £26,000 (worth about £50,000 today) was discovered buried in her parents' garden. Tapie said it had been a loan to help Robert start a restaurant.

The fix wasn't especially subtle. Marseille defeated Valenciennes 1-0 through an Alen Boksic goal, with Robert substituted early on following an innocuous tackle – possibly to establish his alibi. Referee Jean-Marie Veniel suspected something was up as Burruchaga, who normally argued with every decision, accepted each one without quibbling. During the second half, Glassman told Veniel about the bribe, without naming names, and police questioned a number of Valenciennes players after the match.

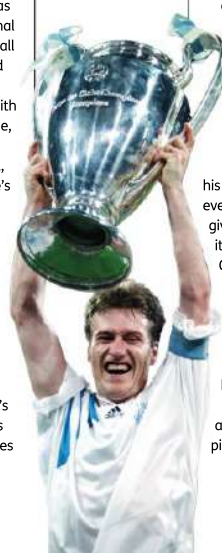
As further, increasingly startling details of systemic corruption emerged, Marseille were stripped of their 1992-93 title, relegated to the second tier and banned from European competition for a season. Ligue 1 runners-up Paris Saint-Germain refused to fill the vacant Champions League spot because their chief sponsor, TV broadcaster Canal+, anticipated a backlash from viewers in southern France. Monaco, Marseille's fierce rivals, seized the opportunity instead.

Tapie's crimes put UEFA on the spot – after all, European football's governing body had only just reinvented the European Cup with considerable fanfare. Gerhard Aigner, UEFA's secretary-general, believed that the revamp would stave off the clear and present danger of a European Super League orchestrated by Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian media magnate who owned Milan. The same logic prompted UEFA's latest elaborate overhaul, which is set to be implemented in 2024-25.

The evidence that Marseille had corrupted Ligue 1 was damning: Bernes stated in court that "four to five matches were the object of illegal dealings" every year. But it was less obvious that the Champions League had been tainted. And so, anxious to protect its flagship event – because dethroning the first champions was hardly great PR – UEFA largely looked the other way, as it had when similar allegations were made against Italian outfits back in the 1960s and '70s.

Sadly, there was more. Eydelie alleges in his memoirs that prior to kick-off in Munich, every Marseille player except Rudi Voller was given an injection to, as the club doctor put it, "boost their adrenaline". Forward Tony Cascarino, who featured for Marseille in the '90s, has said that players were given injections before every home match, dispensed from a "staple gun laden with 20 needles". He was convinced that if he hadn't taken the injections, he wouldn't have been selected.

Other players, including Desailly, have admitted they were encouraged to take pills after being assured they were "safe",



Above Tapie's sins stained l'OM glory
Below Deschamps ended up carrying more than water

which is not quite the same as saying they were legal (or ultimately healthy). According to Eydelie, the amphetamine Captagon was widely prescribed throughout French football in this era.

Tapie vehemently denied all of the charges, and even if the claims are true, such practices certainly weren't unprecedented: mysterious pills were given to Ajax players in the 1970s, and to the West German team that won the 1954 World Cup Final.

BERNARD LE TERRIBLE

Tapie died in October aged 78 after a battle with cancer, but he had reinvented himself as a French national treasure; a loveable rogue whose crimes, if mentioned at all, are seen as ways of goading the establishment.

In his heyday he wasn't quite so loveable, creating a climate of fear and suspicion throughout French football, publicly urging Cantona to seek psychiatric help and once shouting at Arsene Wenger, "I've f**ked you over, you and your s**tty Monaco."

In Tapie's world, regulations were for losers. He had one rule: winning. In his quest for fame and fortune, he crooned, acted, raced cars, owned sports clubs (his cycling team won the Tour de France in 1985 and 1986), broke an Atlantic sailing record, bought and sold troubled companies – including Adidas, briefly but notably – and moved into politics.

If Tapie, a Parisian who nonetheless revelled in his nickname 'Monsieur Marseille', had one ultimate ambition, it was probably to become French president. He got involved with l'OM in 1986 at the request of Gaston Defferre, the city's socialist mayor who wanted a more business-minded president to revive the club's fortunes and boost his own popularity. Vowing to run Marseille as a business, Tapie actually used it as his entrée into the upper echelons of the Socialist Party – he became the minister for city affairs in 1992. After the match-fixing scandal broke, though, he was banned from holding public office.

Tapie transformed l'OM. They dominated French football, ending 17 years without a championship title by winning Ligue 1 five

"I WANTED TO WARN PEOPLE," SAID WENGER, "THOUGH I COULDN'T PROVE IT DEFINITIVELY"

seasons on the spin from 1989 to 1993. Such success owed much to a collection of stellar signings: goalkeeper Barthez; defenders Boli and Desailly; midfielders Deschamps, Franck Sauzee and Dragan Stojkovic; wingers Chris Waddle and Abedi Pele, and forwards Boksic, Voller and Jean-Pierre Papin. It seemed to Marseille's long-suffering ultras as if their club was building something at last.

Tapie's shrewdest recruit was Raymond Goethals: a charismatic and chain-smoking Belgian manager with immense tactical nous, a habit of mispronouncing players' names and a murky past – he had been banned for bribing opponents when Standard Liege won the Belgian title in 1982. Embracing a roster of nicknames, from 'Raymond the Science' and 'The Sorcerer' to 'Columbo', because he wore raincoats as often as the TV detective, Goethals had guided Bordeaux to second place in 1989-90, his first season at the club. In January 1991 he joined l'OM, succeeding West Germany's World Cup-winning coach, Franz Beckenbauer.

Goethals' experience appealed to Tapie. He had reached three Cup Winners' Cup finals: two with Anderlecht (losing to Hamburg in 1977, beating Austria Wien in 1978) and one with Standard Liege (runners-up to Barcelona in 1982). Still, the relationship between the coach and his boss was volatile – as Goethals remembered, "I was shown the door several times a week at Marseille."

At 3am on the morning of a game, Tapie invariably called him to ask, "Coach, are you playing [ie preparing for] the match?" Yet there was also affection. "It was like a game between us: who could be the biggest liar," said Tapie. "We never could tell." The owner also invariably backed his coach's judgement – as Cantona soon discovered.

In retrospect, Goethals' handling of the local lad looks callous and incomprehensible, but the manager had a surfeit of attacking midfielders who liked to run with the ball: Cantona, Pele, Waddle and Stojkovic (though the 'Maradona of the East' was often injured). Cantona had featured regularly at the start of 1990-91. Like most footballers, he then resented not playing. Unlike most footballers, he advertised his discontent. But when he said, "You don't put Cantona on the bench", the coach pointed to a chair and said, "It's all right, Eric, you can sit beside it."

Goethals could build a rapport with players of different nationalities and generations but, as Deschamps recalled, "He had his own way of managing the squad, which would never be accepted today. He had his starting line-up. He knew the 12th, 13th and 14th player by name but after that it was 'thingy' or 'you over there'."

Cantona was unlikely to flourish in such a regime. Alex Ferguson coaxed the best out of him by allowing him a few perks, such as a morning cuppa with the boss. But Cantona dismissing Deschamps as a "water-carrier" suggests that he had his blind spots as well.

Unfortunately for Cantona, Marseille's ultras adored Goethals, their dynamic, scruffy and self-deprecating coach. Like Tapie, he knew how to give a performance. As Desailly said, Marseille was a "crazy city" and fans felt that this "crazy" coach was one of them.

INSPECTOR ARSENE

Although Basile Boli felt a sense of unfinished business after defeat to Red Star in 1991, not everyone felt such pressure two years later.

"Nobody, including ourselves, expected Marseille to win the Champions League that season," said Desailly, who joined the club in 1992. "We were probably the weakest team of the Tapie era. We had incredible players – Rudi Voller and Alen Boksic, for example – but lacked that individual star. We all had to work collectively... which we did."

HEART OF GLASS

It wasn't just Marseille who felt the consequences of their cheating

Whistleblower Jacques Glassman wasn't exactly lauded in France for uncovering corruption – quite the opposite.

The Valenciennes man arguably came out of it worst of all. He was condemned as a snitch, jeered by supporters wherever he went, and even received threatening letters. His club were relegated in 1992-93 and then again the following year, when he was released.

The struggle to find another club took Glassman to amateur team Maubeuge, before he finished his career with Sainte-Rose on the Indian Ocean island of Reunion (later, he maintained that this wasn't his entry into exile; rather, "the project won me over").

There was a happy ending, at least. In 1995, FIFA presented him with their annual Fair Play Award, and since then, even the likes of Eydelie have saluted his bravery.

Glassman went on to work for France's players' union, prior to taking up a position with the LFP.

In retrospect, though, Marseille's line-up in Munich looked more than decent. At his peak, future Middlesbrough striker Boksic had it all: pace, power, creativity and technique. Even a coach as experienced as Goethals – who, being 71 at the time, is still the oldest boss ever to win the European Cup – marvelled at the artistry and speed of Ghanaian attacking midfielder Pele.

The rest of the midfield wasn't too shabby, either. Sauzee, who could shoot accurately from any distance, plundered six goals in the campaign – as many as Boksic. Deschamps thrived as Goethals' coach on the pitch, while Boli and Desailly provided an effective screen for the eccentric but brilliant Barthez.

Goethals' tactics against Milan more than justified his 'Sorcerer' moniker. Persuading his squad to adopt zonal marking – revolutionary in France at the time – he had his team play 5-3-2, countering the Italians' high-pressing 4-4-2 with long passes.

These long balls weren't just hopeful hoofs: the purpose was to instil doubt among the Rossoneri's back four and exhaust defensive organiser Franco Baresi. Pele man-marked Paolo Maldini, restricting service from the left to Marco van Basten, Roberto Donadoni and Daniele Massaro. The game was certainly no thriller, but the French champions executed Goethals' gameplan brilliantly.

L'OM made history as the first French club to be crowned champions of Europe and yet, Desailly reflected, that achievement had even more resonance in Marseille, "where football could make a city feel magnificent and help people to forget their problems".

But did they deserve to compete for their prize in the first place? Wenger thought not. For a start, they qualified by systematically corrupting Ligue 1, before gaining an unfair advantage in Europe by resting their stars for fixed domestic games. Wenger was sure that three Monaco players had been bribed to take it easy during a 3-0 loss at home to Marseille in April 1992. One player reluctantly confessed to him but Monegasques president Jean-Louis Campora, fearing the burgeoning scandal would destroy French football, opted against taking the matter any further.

"I wanted to warn people, making it public, but couldn't prove anything definitively," the future Arsenal boss later admitted.

Even Marseille's European Cup campaigns weren't above suspicion. French magistrate Pierre Philippon accused Tapie of paying out £12 million to fix a trio of matches: a 1989 second-round clash with AEK Athens, a 1991 semi-final against Spartak Moscow (both backed by testimony from Bernes), and the 1-0 win over Club Brugge that sent l'OM into the 1993 final.

Cheating in football isn't usually as blatant as Maradona's Hand of God. As Wenger has observed, "All you have to do is take a corner a bit too far to the left or right, or be slightly in the wrong position either offensively or defensively, and you can give the impression of having played well." With such nuances in mind, what are we to make of the own goal scored by AEK defender Stelios Manolas in the 1989 second round? Was it premeditated – Marseille led 1-0 at the time and should probably have been 4-0 up – or hapless, as it looks on video?

The magistrate's claims about Brugge are backed by Cornel Dinu, former Romania and Dinamo Bucharest manager, who said in his 2019 autobiography that he gave $20,000 to Romanian referee Ion Craciunescu to *not* book Boli, who would have been suspended for the final. Dinu also alleged that Goethals had bribed some Brugge players (for the record, however, French courts acquitted Tapie and his associates of all three charges).

Above Match-fixing claims did little at the time to dampen the joy of Boli, Tapie, and Marseille's fans **Below** Raymond 'Columbo' Goethals was, above all, cosy

One match Phillippon didn't highlight was CSKA Moscow's 6-0 battering at Marseille in March 1993. None of the goals look peculiar, but CSKA coach Gennadi Kostylev later said that he'd turned down a bribe, and that his players had probably accepted a bribe, until eventually he withdrew these claims. There was talk that CSKA players' drinks had been spiked, but were they beaten so convincingly because there was a conspiracy, or because they weren't very good? They came bottom of Group A with two points.

Rangers' visit to the Stade Velodrome on matchday five looked likely to decide who won Group A. The Scottish club's striker, Mark Hateley, has revealed he turned down an offer of "lots of money" by an unnamed French agent to sit out the game. He actually missed the 1-1 draw anyway, suspended after

SIDEBAR OF SHAME

BERNARD TAPIE

Tapie served eight months behind bars in 1997, yet returned to his beloved club for another stint four years later, this time as minority shareholder and sports manager. He made his stage debut in 2000 as the lead in a production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. He recently died aged 78.

JEAN-PIERRE BERNES

The general manager was hit with a two-year suspended sentence and also received a life ban by the French FA, later overturned by FIFA. He then became a high-powered agent for the likes of Didier Deschamps, Laurent Blanc, Franck Ribery and Samir Nasri.

JEAN-JACQUES EYDELIE

The Marseille midfielder who handed over the cash was banned for 12 months by FIFA, given a one-year suspended sentence and spent a brief spell in prison. He returned to play for Benfica, Bastia and, er, Walsall.

CHRISTOPHE ROBERT

Valenciennes' frontman was given a six-month suspended sentence, while his wife was also charged with conspiracy. He turned out for Buenos Aires-based Ferro Carril Oeste in 1994-95.

JORGE BURRUCHAGA

Charged with "passive corruption", having not been accused of actually receiving any cash, the 1986 World Cup Final goalscorer was still given a suspended six-month prison sentence, by which time he had returned home to Argentina with Independiente.

TAPIE'S FOLLY INADVERTENTLY PLAYED A BIG ROLE IN THE SUCCESS OF THE PREMIER LEAGUE

getting sent off against Brugge. Rangers boss Smith later insisted, "If we hadn't lost Mark for the Marseille game, we would have got to the final." Whether or not that's true, video footage shows that Hateley was given a red card after a squabble with Brugge's Lorenzo Staelens: their handbags started innocuously enough, but finished with the striker shoving Staelens. No dive, no dodgy decision – even the *Glasgow Herald* conceded that Polish referee Ryszard Wojcik had correctly applied the letter of the law.

Boli did score the final's solitary goal from a corner that shouldn't have been given. The referee, Kurt Rothlisberger, would be handed a ban for offering to fix a Champions League match for Swiss outfit Grasshoppers in 1996, in exchange for $600,000. Still, the case that Marseille stole the 1993 Champions League could best be described, in a verdict unique to Scotland's legal system, as 'not proven'.

Above Boli stuns Milan's famous backline in Munich

It's also true, as even Wenger conceded, that Tapie's l'OM were a magnificent team. In the 1993 final, 10 of the starting XI were internationals – including right-back Jocelyn Angloma, who would become an integral part of the thrilling Valencia side that reached successive Champions League showpieces in 2000 and 2001.

One striking proof of Marseille's quality is their record against a Milan team that is still regarded as one of the greatest in the history of club football. In Munich, Capello's outfit were a formidable, if declining, force. When the sides met in their 1991 quarter-final, the Rossoneri were managed by their architect, the legendary Arrigo Sacchi, and Marseille's 1-1 draw at San Siro showed why the ultras called Pele 'Maestro'. Collecting the ball in midfield with his back to goal, he flummoxed Carlo Ancelotti with a 360-degree turn, ran straight at the heart of Milan's midfield and then, with opponents closing in and about to lose his balance, dinked the ball to Waddle. The Geordie wizard's sweeping pass picked out Papin, who duly slotted home the leveller without breaking stride.

It's also sadly typical of Tapie's Marseille that the quarter-final is best remembered for a floodlight failure during the second leg in France. Under orders from managing director Adriano Galliani, Milan refused to restart the game and forfeited the tie.

THE FALLOUT

Tapiegate had many unintended, unexpected consequences – especially in England.

Suspecting he had been cheated out of two league titles, Wenger left France in disgust to manage Nagoya Grampus Eight in Japan. He was thus fortuitously available to take over at Arsenal in 1996. Wenger initiated the club's signing of Dennis Bergkamp, revolutionised training and match preparation in England and, for a heady period, knocked Ferguson's Manchester United off their perch.

On the advice of his mentor, Michel Platini, Cantona moved to English shores, where he became United's talismanic No.7 and drew many other gifted Europeans to Old Trafford.

It wouldn't be hyperbole to say that Tapie's folly inadvertently played a large part in the Premier League's extraordinary success.

And, as Boli suggested, Tapie's wonderful, corrupt l'OM may well have helped French football to overcome its inferiority complex and win the 1998 World Cup in Saint-Denis. Deschamps would lift the trophy once again in 2018, this time as Les Bleus' coach. He also managed Marseille when they won Ligue 1 in 2009-10, their only championship since Tapie's departure.

Marseille are still among Europe's leading sides, although – blessed and/or cursed with a large, passionate and occasionally ferocious fanbase – club directors have shown precious patience with their managers, trying out 29 coaching regimes during the 28 years since Goethals manned the dugout.

If Lionel Messi does deliver the Champions League for his new employers, PSG will be the first French team to bring home Ol' Big Ears (relatively) unsullied by skulduggery. Tapie genuinely loved football – almost as much as he loved himself – but his tainted love for Marseille still stains their greatest moment.

As Goethals once complained, "You French, you win a European Cup and you immediately fill it with s**t."

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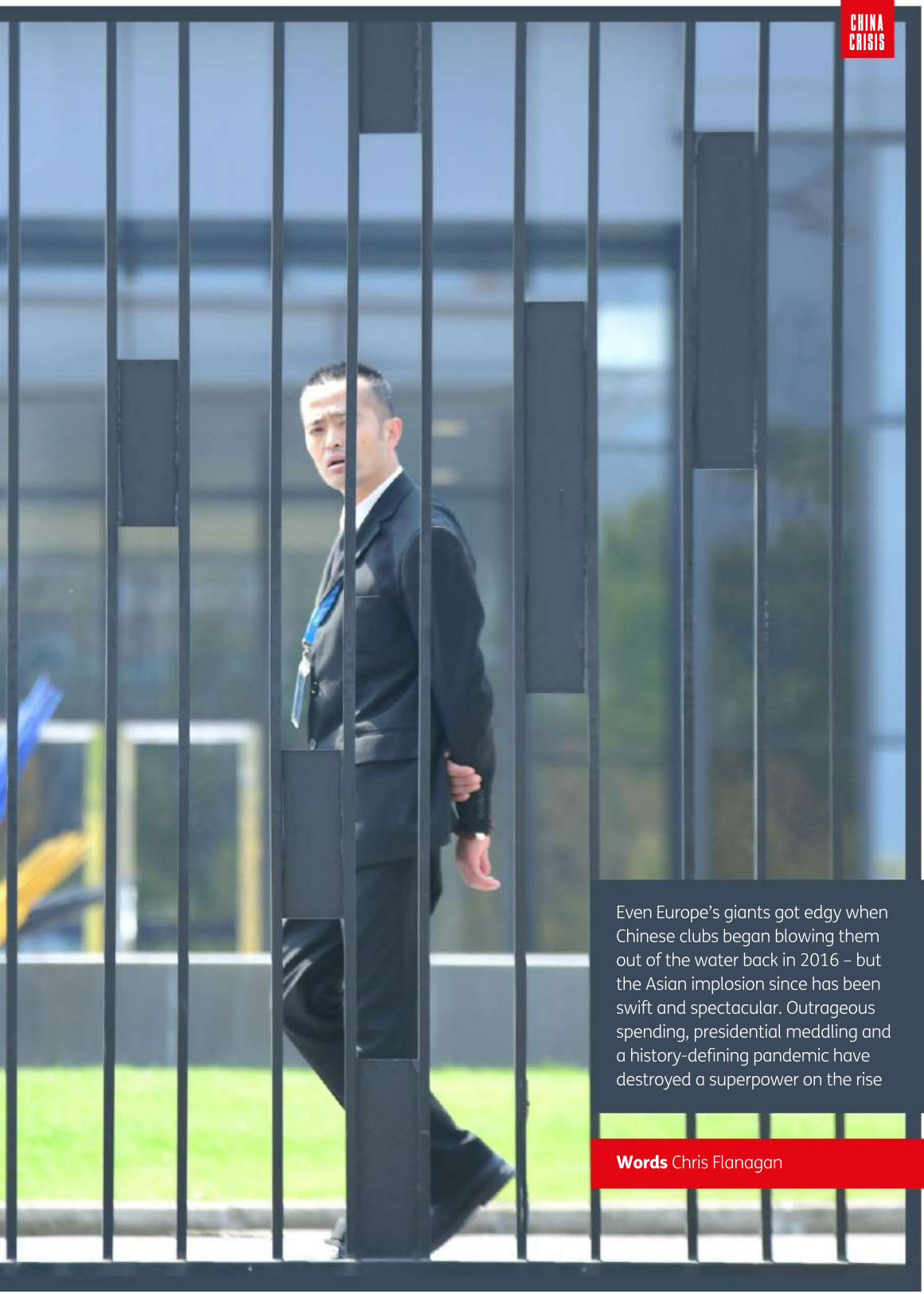
- Arsene Wenger at Nagoya Grampus Eight: how he rediscovered his great love in Japan *(by John Duerden)*
- 10 of the ugliest match-fixing scandals in football history *(by Scott McIntyre)*
- Chris Waddle: Great Goals Retold (Marseille vs Paris Saint-Germain, 1989)

THE GREAT FALL OF CHINA



Even Europe's giants got edgy when Chinese clubs began blowing them out of the water back in 2016 – but the Asian implosion since has been swift and spectacular. Outrageous spending, presidential meddling and a history-defining pandemic have destroyed a superpower on the rise

Words Chris Flanagan

In one short sentence, the dream was all over. "From today, Jiangsu Football Club ceases operations of its teams," a statement read.

Less than four months earlier, Alex Teixeira had curled home the decisive goal in front of thousands of jubilant fans, to give the club its first Chinese Super League title.

This was a club that had outbid Liverpool to recruit the Brazilian from Shakhtar Donetsk in 2016 – the same year in which they had lured Ramires from Chelsea. This was a club that had hired Fabio Capello as manager in 2017. This was also a club that came close to signing Gareth Bale from Real Madrid in 2019, on a deal reported to be worth £1 million per week.

But by the end of February 2021, the club was no more. For the second year in a row, a Super League giant was consigned to the dustbin of history, after Tianjin Quanjian – the club of Fabio Cannavaro, Axel Witsel, Luis Fabiano, Alex Pato, Vanderlei Luxemburgo and Paulo Sousa. The club was disbanded in 2020, despite being linked with a bold move for Cristiano Ronaldo just two years earlier.

At one time, every superstar on the planet was deemed a target for the financial might of Chinese football. Lionel Messi was said to have been offered a bonkers £88m-per-year salary to move to Asia, before inking a new deal at Barcelona in 2017.

But this summer, when both Ronaldo and Messi became available, Chinese clubs were no longer in the running. If the boom years appeared too good to be true for the Super League, they proved to be exactly that. In the space of just half a decade, boom has been followed by bust.

GOLDEN-FALLS

When David Beckham visited China back in 2013, the universe may have been trying to tell them that they were setting themselves up for a fall. Unveiled as the Chinese Super League's first global ambassador, a suit-clad Becks marked an appearance in Wuhan by trying to take a few free-kicks – only to lose his footing on the turf and come a cropper in front of the world's media.

Just nine days earlier, Xi Jinping had been elected as China's new president with an audacious plan: to make the most populous country on Earth a footballing superpower,

harnessing the potential of 1.4 billion people to win the World Cup by 2050.

Investment had already started pouring into the Super League – the Evergrande Real Estate Group had taken over Guangzhou FC in 2010 and hired Marcello Lippi as boss two years later. By the end of 2013, the renamed Guangzhou Evergrande had become China's first winners of the Asian Champions League – even if their side didn't contain any stellar names at that point.

When they won the Champions League for a second time in 2015 – under another World Cup-winning coach in Luiz Felipe Scolari – they had signed Brazil international Paulinho from Tottenham. The Super League's recruitment drive was being ratcheted up a notch, aided by a number of takeover deals.

Among others, Jiangsu Guoxin-Sainty were rebranded Jiangsu Suning after a buyout by the Suning group; Shanghai East Asia turned into Shanghai SIPG to recognise the Shanghai International Port Group; Tianjin Songjiang became Tianjin Quanjian after the Quanjian herbal medicine firm, while Hebei Zhongji were reborn as Hebei China Fortune after the China Fortune land development company.

Evergrande signed Atletico Madrid forward Jackson Martinez for a Chinese record fee of £31m in February 2016, then saw Jiangsu trump them two days later by shelling out £34m to snaffle Teixeira ahead of Liverpool. The new money was making China's top tier a major force. Brazilian Hulk joined Shanghai SIPG from Zenit Saint Petersburg for £45m later that year, and Southampton's Graziano Pelle moved to Shandong Luneng on wages of £350,000 per week – placing him seventh among the world's best-paid players.

"The Premier League should be worried," warned Arsene Wenger, "because China looks to have the financial power to move a whole league of Europe to China."

Super League attendances increased too, peaking at an average of more than 24,000 in 2016, compared to below 15,000 in 2010. Prior to the 2017 campaign, more big names poured in: Chelsea's Oscar to Shanghai SIPG for a new Chinese record £52m, then Carlos Tevez to rivals Shanghai Shenhua, reportedly picking up £650,000 to become the planet's highest-paid footballer.

Even Ronaldo was targeted. "An offer of €300m to Real Madrid and more than €100m per year was made to the player from China," confirmed his agent Jorge Mendes. Tianjin Quanjian were said to be the club interested in taking him to the Far East.

"The future for China is great," said former England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson, who coached Guangzhou R&F, Shanghai SIPG and Shenzhen between 2013 and 2017. "Maybe 10 or 15 years from now, I'm sure that China will compete to win the World Cup."

BALE OUT

For the national team, though, success was proving hard to come by. China qualified for their one and only World Cup in 2002 – losing all three group matches to Brazil, Turkey and Costa Rica without scoring a goal – but didn't even make the final round of qualifying for the next three tournaments.

Clockwise from top Oscar arrives in Shanghai after his record move; Tevez and Pato happily cashed in; Becks decks it; Jiangsu's HQ lies empty following the club's demise

CHINA PLANNED TO BECOME A FOOTBALL SUPERPOWER AND EVENTUALLY WIN THE WORLD CUP BY 2050

Following an 8-0 battering against Brazil in 2012, China sat 109th in the FIFA rankings – down from 50th in 2002, and 37th in 1998. The women's side weren't doing much better either, hovering around 15th from a high of 4th back in 2003.

Lippi was persuaded to take over the men's team in October 2016; China had staggered into the final round of qualifying for the 2018 World Cup, but then took just one point from their first four matches – defeats to Syria and Uzbekistan left them an almost impossible task of reaching Russia. After even the Italian master could only secure a 0-0 draw at home to lowly Qatar, Chinese authorities started to think more widely about how to remedy the national side's problems.

Their first move was to reduce the number of foreign players that Super League outfits could field. Only three could now be involved in a match – down from the previous number of five, including an Asian player. The change provided immediate complications for clubs who had been planning to splash the cash... particularly Tianjin Quanjian.

"This situation has brought a change to our signing plans," complained owner Shu Yuhui, who had been in talks with Radamel Falcao, Diego Costa and Raul Jimenez. "We'd made an offer for Edinson Cavani and were deep in negotiations. We made an offer for Karim Benzema too, but with this policy change we are left helpless."

In the end, none of the illustrious quintet turned up. Just a few months later, after the Chinese national team again failed to beat Syria and their World Cup hopes effectively ended, another significant regulation landed. Transfer fees exceeding £5.2m for overseas players would be subject to a 100 per cent tax, with the same fee paid to a Chinese FA youth development fund. Doubling the price of any signing meant mega-money transfers quickly became rare, and shifted clubs' focus towards free agents.

A novel plan was also unveiled for China's under-20 team to join Germany's fourth tier, to gain valuable experience. After scepticism among German supporters, the scheme was downgraded to a series of friendlies – before being abandoned altogether when a match was halted by a pro-Tibet protest.

Names still flocked to China, though: Javier Mascherano and Yannick Carrasco pitched up in 2018 from Barça and Atletico respectively, while former Wales manager Chris Coleman replaced Manuel Pellegrini as boss of Hebei China Fortune. Reports in Spain claimed that a Super League side had offered Messi £1.7m per week to head east, and Bale came within a whisker of joining Jiangsu Suning – only for Florentino Perez to make a U-turn on letting him leave without a fee. "We agreed with his agent, we agreed with Madrid, but then they changed their mind," sighed Jiangsu gaffer Cosmin Olaroiu. "Suddenly they said, 'No, you have to pay for the transfer'. It was a little bit over our budget."

Marouane Fellaini, Mousa Dembele, Marko Arnautovic, Marek Hamsik and Yaya Toure did join the league in 2019, and Rafael Benitez was appointed the manager of Dalian Yifang, vowing to put a European structure in place that would benefit the club for the long term. "Then, in the future, if you're not there, they can carry on doing things in a European way," he told *FFT*. "We're trying to build something." Even Mark Clattenburg was recruited by the league as a referee.

Not everyone enjoyed their time in China. Tevez lasted a season with Shanghai Shenhua – a period in which he was called overweight by his boss and caused controversy by visiting Disneyland on the day he missed a game due to injury. He returned to Boca Juniors having collected around £35m in wages. "I was on holiday for seven months in China," he later joked. "It's fine for the Shanghai coach and president to criticise me – I didn't know what I was doing there."

Super League sides were unable to build on Evergrande's 2015 Asian Champions League triumph – no Chinese team has appeared in the final since. Then in early 2020 came the toughest challenge of all, when the country became the epicentre of coronavirus. Some Super League squads were left marooned in

THIS SEASON BEGAN WITHOUT CHAMPIONS JIANGSU, DISSOLVED AFTER THEIR PARENT COMPANY PULLED OUT

Europe, where they had been based for their pre-season training camps – among them Benitez's Dalian Yifang, and Wuhan Zall, the team from the city where the virus emerged.

With restrictions in place throughout China, the start of the campaign was delayed by five months to July, when the league's 16 teams were split into two groups of eight, before an end-of-season play-off system to decide the title and relegation. Almost all matches were played at neutral locations.

Wuhan just escaped the drop after winning their final fixture against Zhejiang Energy Greentown, and Benitez's Dalian also found themselves in the relegation play-offs but comfortably avoided a slip into the second tier. It was all a soulless experience for the Spaniard. "This season, with the format of the competition, it doesn't matter where you finish – it's just so strange that I don't care," he admitted. Benitez soon left – one of many overseas names departing China, after travel restrictions in and out of the country made it almost impossible to visit family elsewhere in the world.

MIND THE CAP

The pandemic had hit finances hard at Super League clubs, too, at a time when many had already over-extended themselves. Tianjin Quanjian ran into significant difficulties after owner Shu Yuhui was arrested in December 2018, with the Quanjian Group accused of false marketing. The club was taken over by the local FA and renamed Tianjin Tianhai, but disbanded in May 2020.

With two more former Super League teams dissolving in 2020, following Yanbian Funde from 2019, another drastic regulation change was revealed at the end of the year. A salary cap would be introduced, limiting wages for foreign signings to £2.5m a year, or £50,000 per week. That was no longer big enough to lure the top players, and the exodus of talent has continued – including Teixeira, Hulk, Pelle, Hamsik, Paulinho and Arnautovic.

Fellaini, Oscar and Dembele are among the few stars remaining for the 2021 campaign, which has persisted with the group format of 2020. The season started without champions Jiangsu Suning, who overcame Guangzhou Evergrande in November's play-off final.

The club were initially renamed Jiangsu FC in early February, after yet another regulation banning corporate references in club names, at a time when the country itself seems to be inching towards a more socialist approach. Guangzhou Evergrande are now Guangzhou FC, Shanghai SIPG are Shanghai Port, Hebei China Fortune are Hebei, while Shijiazhuang Ever Bright relocated 150 miles and became the Cangzhou Mighty Lions.

By the end of the month, though, Jiangsu had vanished completely – the Suning group announced they were reducing their sporting commitments to focus on their core retail business, amid the wobbly financial climate. The group also own Italian champions Inter, who have endured budget cuts this year and sold Romelu Lukaku to Chelsea.

Several other Chinese outfits have suffered money woes, with Shandong denied a licence to play in the Asian Champions League due to "overdue payables". Quarantine directives meant all three Chinese sides in this season's Champions League fielded reserve teams and failed to reach the knockout stages – instead, they lost 12 of their combined 13 matches against clubs from the Philippines, Thailand and even Hong Kong.

Amid it all, China's attempts to qualify for the World Cup have spluttered on. Cannavaro was set to lead the campaign after replacing Lippi as manager in early 2019, then lost two China Cup ties and quit a month into the job. Lippi came back and presided over a plan of naturalising players from the Chinese Super League. Four Brazilians were recruited, among them Elkeson – the league's all-time leading scorer, who was given a Chinese name of Ai Kesen. Two England-born players of Chinese descent pledged their allegiance: ex-Arsenal right-back Nico Yennaris, renamed Li Ke, and former Everton defender Tyias Browning, now known as Jiang Guangtai.

They have steered China to the final round of World Cup qualifying, but only after a loss to Syria that prompted Lippi's resignation for a second time. Under replacement boss Li Tie, formerly of Everton and Sheffield United, they started the final phase with defeats to Australia and Japan, putting them bottom of a six-team group. Only two teams advance to Qatar, with a third going into a play-off.

The 2026 World Cup may be more realistic, when Asia will bag eight qualification spots as the tournament expands to 48 teams, but China were only the ninth-best Asian nation in September's FIFA rankings, behind Iraq, the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Hosting the finals could prove an alternative way in – they are seen as serious contenders to stage the 2034 World Cup – but China's predicted rise to footballing domination has ground to a screeching halt.

No longer are there rumours of Messi, Bale and Ronaldo heading to Asia for riches galore. The Chinese Super League's boom years are well and truly over – all that's left is a trail of debt and despair.

THE UYGHUR WHO MADE HISTORY

Oscar remains the Chinese Super League's record buy – but the Brazilian schemer has been sharing the field with another history maker.

Shanghai Port team-mate Mirahmetjan Muzepper was the first Uyghur ever to play for China when he debuted against Qatar in 2018, giving representation to an ethnic group increasingly maltreated in recent times.

Two years ago, Mesut Özil incurred the wrath of China's government when he spoke out about the widely reported deployment of forced labour camps for Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, in the far north-west of the country. The Arsenal man was swiftly deleted from video games in China, and an Arsenal match was axed from television schedules.

Özil's divisive social media post was accompanied by the flag of East Turkistan, the Uyghur name for the Xinjiang region – one that is banned in China but was also displayed by a protester during their 3-0 defeat to Turkey at the 2002 World Cup, to ensure it was seen on state TV. Unconfirmed reports claimed 20 Uyghurs were arrested in Xinjiang that day after cheering every goal for Turkey, a nation who share their Muslim faith.

The region has never had a Chinese Super League team but are currently represented in the second tier by Xinjiang Tianshan Leopard, a diverse side who have been perennial strugglers – they only avoided relegation to the third division because of financial issues at other clubs. Their opening 25 matches of 2021 brought just a single victory and 19 losses, including a 7-0 shellacking at home to Chengdu Rongcheng.

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AROUND THE GROUNDS

EFL • NON-LEAGUE • SCOTLAND

INTERVIEW

TROY DEENEY

The striker is finally back home at Brum, and tells *FFT* of his crazy life so far: riling Arsenal, doing time, and the day his old man locked a bloke in a boot

Interview Sam Pilger

How did it feel to join your boyhood club Birmingham in August?
It was a fantastic feeling, and in many ways was the perfect move for me. This is my club; I have the crest tattooed on my leg. I'm 33 and felt I'd missed my chance for it to happen – it's been my dream since I was a kid.

What do you think this Birmingham team can achieve this season?
I've not signed for a jolly-up. I may be over 30 now, but I'm not an OAP who wants to wind down and have a good time. I'm under quite a lot of pressure; I want to win. I think we can deliver the play-offs this season, but there are 15 other teams who believe that, too. It's only Fulham and West Brom who know they can get one of the two automatic places, while all the others want to be the best of the rest.

The last time you played for a team in Birmingham was for non-league Chelmsley when you were 18. Back then, did you ever expect to make it to the Premier League?
No I didn't. I was happy just playing for Chelmsley, to be honest. I didn't want to be found. I thought I'd hit my ceiling, working as a bricklayer and getting £50 a game for football. I thought that was as good as it got, and I was genuinely happy with that. At school, my teachers said I'd soon be dead, so I was pleased to be proving them wrong.

You've played in England's top four divisions. How do you reflect on your path through the game?
I always say I've turned up to training with boots in an Asda bag, and shaken hands with Prince William on the pitch at Wembley before an FA Cup final. The higher up you go, the more chance you have of the showers working! I've loved every minute of it. I couldn't believe it when I played for clubs where you got a coach to games. It's a lot nicer in the Premier League, but I've soaked it all up and been happy at any level.

In 2012 you were convicted of affray and served three months in prison – how hard was that?
It was tough, because in prison you're always on edge. I can remember some of the prisoners almost being annoyed at me, as they were criminals but I was a professional footballer. They said this was their life but I didn't need to be in there. Some of them knew my dad and couldn't believe I was there with them.

> "THE HIGHER UP IN THE GAME YOU GO, THE MORE CHANCE YOU'VE GOT OF THE SHOWERS WORKING"

How was life alongside your father?
There were crazy moments growing up, but we just dealt with them. They were serious, but I always loved him. People might think I had a difficult childhood, but I enjoyed it. You might say my dad was a Jekyll and Hyde character, but he wasn't bipolar. He was happy-go-lucky and encouraged us to do well, but he had a nasty side too. Some might say similar about me. I can remember him picking me up after playing for Walsall at Northampton, and on the way home I could hear noises in the boot. I found out he'd locked someone in it! I mean, in hindsight it's mad. It was a complex lifestyle, but my dad also made me feel safe. He was my superhero and would do anything for you.

How have you changed since being in prison?
I was on a self-destructive path before going inside. I didn't care about a thing and was living in the world of Troy. It allowed me to re-evaluate my life and what I was doing.

You had 17 managers in 11 years at Watford. Who understood you the most, who improved you as a player and who did you get on with least?
Sean Dyche understood me more than the rest. He knew that I needed tough

love and structure in my life. Gianfranco Zola taught me how to be a player and the fine art of being a striker. He added technique to my game. And I probably didn't have a brilliant relationship with Walter Mazzarri.

Can you describe the intense joy of scoring *that* goal against Leicester in the 2013 play-off semi-finals?
I scored 140 goals for Watford, but it's the only one anyone remembers! Just thinking about it now makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It was a fantastic moment. Only today, I got the train down to London and the driver asked for a picture with me. He said, "I don't know a lot about football, but I know it was you who scored that goal." It's my Aguero moment; people know where they were when I scored.

You then nearly signed for Leicester in 2016, when they were the reigning champions. Why did it fall through?
I think it just came down to the money – Watford were looking for £30 million, but Leicester wouldn't go above £27m. I didn't mind, though, I have no regrets. I'm not quite sure if I was ready to take on a price tag that huge. It was Jamie Vardy's team and I was never going to be top dog there. The only thing I know is that I'd have got an England call-up if I'd moved to Leicester, but by staying at Watford it didn't happen.

Do you regret saying that an Arsenal side you faced lacked cojones once?
No I don't – I think I was right on that occasion. Supporters are always saying players are boring, but then when you tell the truth, they also say you can't be that honest. I mean, come on: we're all bored of players saying after a match, "The fans were great, we go again." It's bulls**t – everyone knows it's bulls**t, and that players don't admit how they really feel. When I said that, I was just being true to myself. Now don't get me wrong, I've been in sides that haven't shown cojones. The 2019 FA Cup Final when Manchester City beat Watford 6-0 – we didn't show any at Wembley that day. It's happened to every player.

How do you feel about your journey to redemption at the moment?
I'm the happiest I've been in my adult life – I'm embracing who I am, warts and all. Everybody posts the best stuff on social media, but I know that's not real life. I have flaws, but I'm trying to be a better version of myself. Knowing I'm doing that is enough for me. I don't want stress. I'm dealing with trauma, but I can't hold on to the past – I want to move on and grow. I'm 33 years old, have great kids and a brilliant missus.

'Redemption: My Story' by Troy Deeney is available now, published by Cassell

EFL NEWS

TURN ON THE LIGHTS

The Saturday 3pm blackout is supposed to protect EFL clubs, but not everybody is totally convinced – Peterborough co-owner Stewart Thompson among them...

What do Peterborough United and Cristiano Ronaldo have in common? Not a lot at face value, but it turns out they're both inspiring discussion about English football's hallowed Saturday 3pm blackout.

While Ronaldo's second debut for Manchester United in September may have caused a ruckus after red tape meant it couldn't be shown live on domestic telly, it's not just Red Devils fans lamenting the rule.

It's also proved a bone of contention for Peterborough co-owner Stewart Thompson, who thinks the blackout – and Article 48 of UEFA's statutes that enforces it – stifles clubs further down the pyramid, rather than safeguards them and their crowds.

"Who is the beneficiary of getting rid of the 3pm blackout?" Thompson asks *FFT*. "I believe the dissolution of Article 48 is a benefit to grassroots football, as clubs can be the winners by taking ownership of their broadcast platforms. They can actually support local people to be part of their club."

The Posh chief isn't alone. He says a gaggle of other EFL owners feel the same, and want to force a discussion about abolishing the rule before the rights for Sky's current broadcast deal are renegotiated in 18 months' time.

Thompson, a digital investor who bought a 50 per cent stake in United with business partner Jason Neale three and a half years ago, insists EFL sides can improve on iFollow streams and offer a higher-quality service that allows virtual supporters to interact with each other.

Streaming parties could guarantee a secondary revenue, continues the Canadian, giving fans the opportunity to engage with former players and pundits while enjoying the game from wherever they are.

"I might have young children and can't travel from Newcastle to Wales on a Saturday to go a game, or I could be in a seniors home, or in hospital, or one of a million reasons why fans can't be there and savour the football experience – it doesn't make sense," he explains. "There's no reason why I should be able to see a game here on a Saturday because I'm Canadian, while a Peterborough fan of 40 years can't watch it with the same iFollow experience I have."

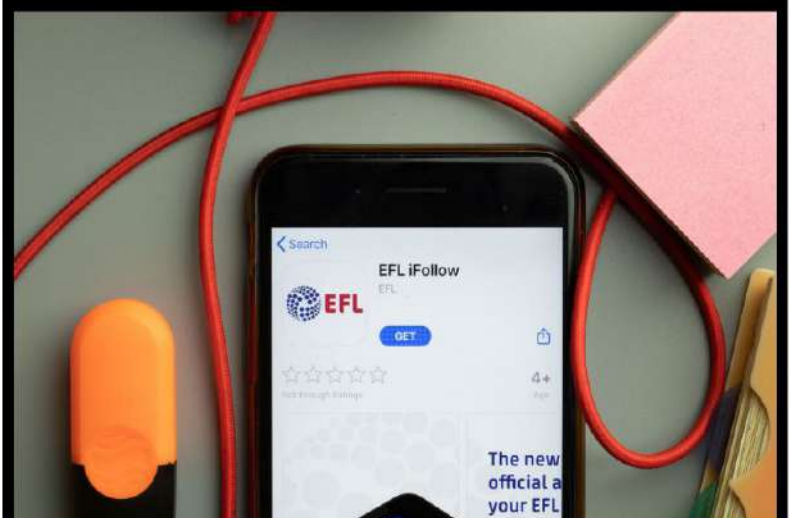
The concern has always been that as soon as games are broadcast live at 3pm, gates – and therefore money in clubs' coffers – will drop across the divisions. However, Thompson isn't so sure. One solution he offers is making the cost of a streaming ticket similar to that of venturing to the stadium – not that he thinks the prospect of an afternoon plonked on the sofa will entice match-going diehards to stay at home anyway.

"We're trying to attract a generation starved of experiences, who spend far too much time in front of screens," reasons Thompson. "This is the magic – this isn't 1965 or 1978 or even 1992 any more. We're moving into a place where Gen X-ers and Boomers aren't going to drive what happens, and we need to provide a multitude of options for fans of all ages to experience their club the way they want.

"I don't believe you'll ever replace the magic of a matchday with five of your mates, walking up to your sacred ground and feeling the hair on your arms tingle as everyone else does the same. It's such a big experience and you can't substitute it digitally. But I'd say that if you can't be present at the stadium for any reason whatsoever, you should still be allowed to be part of something you've been supporting your entire life."

For now, Thompson & Co remain in the dark, although maybe not for too much longer.

Chris Evans



BEST&WORST

HEART OF MIDLOTHIAN

Half-time subs, gerbils and Mr Blobby: it's all in the life of a maroon for **Paul Robertson,** aka @HeartsRant

XI

BEST: Craig Gordon, Takis Fyssas, Craig Levein, David Weir, Sandy Jardine, John Colquhoun, Paul Hartley, Neil McCann, Colin Cameron, John Robertson [right], Rudi Skacel.
WORST: Joel Pereira, Nerijus Barasa, Dawid Kucharski, Kevin James, Lennard Sowah, Kevin Twaddle, Leigh Jenkinson, Mo Berthe, Danny Swanson, Arkadiusz Klimek, Paul McCallum.

PLAYER

B: No one rivals Robertson, who hit 310 goals in 719 matches wearing maroon. With 27 coming against Hibernian, he's definitely earned the 'Hammer of the Hibs' moniker. Statue required.
W: It's difficult to see past Manchester United loanee Pereira: poppadom hands and utterly incapable of catching a football.

MOMENT

B: Watching Gary Locke and Steve Fulton lift the Scottish Cup in 1998 [right], having beaten Rangers 2-1. After 36 years without a trophy, none of us thought we'd ever see that.
W: June 2013, when news broke that we were in administration. It was a frightening time.

SEASON

B: Our 2005-06 cup-winning campaign was great fun under Vladimir Romanov. Seeing Champions League winners like Edgaras Jankauskas sporting maroon as we fought for the title was surreal.
W: 1986. To blow the league *and* lose the cup within a week was such a cruel end for a terrific team. Zero thanks to St Mirren for lying down against Celtic (yes, I'm still bitter).

SIGNING

B: Craig Gordon's return last summer. Not just an amazing keeper, but a leader and dyed-in-the-wool Hearts supporter.
W: Czech striker David Vanecek arrived in 2019 with YouTube videos promising an assassin. He was never seen again after being subbed at half-time in only his seventh appearance and effectively branded a fat bastard by boss Levein.

NICKNAME

B: Neil Pointon was known as 'Dissa'.
W: This'll be controversial, but I can't stand the new-age trend of people referring to Hearts fans as 'Jambos'.

MANAGER

B: I love Paulo Sergio, but nothing tops legendary 1998 cup winning-gaffer Jim Jefferies. Immense service as a player, captain, manager and director.
W: Tommy McLean was arrogance and stubbornness personified across a brief mid-90s tenure, nearly taking us down.

KIT

B: The 1988-89 'candy stripe' shirt looked resplendent on the majestic John Colquhoun.
W: The Earl of Rosebery strip in 2016-17 was excruciatingly bad. Imagine a kit designed by Mr Blobby. Let it never be seen in public again.

CULT HERO

B: Phil Stamp. A talented guy who had a colourful character. Within months of signing from Middlesbrough in 2002, there were reports of him trashing his rental house, with food stains left 'on the ceiling'. He's best remembered for a last-minute winner against Hibs at Easter Road, where he got himself sent off after immediately jumping into the away end. What a man.
W: Wayne Foster. A striker who hardly ever scored, but no one cares because he scored when it mattered – in a 2-1 win at Hibs in 1994. Now an Edinburgh postman who's regularly seen in pubs around Gorgie.

AWAY TRIP

B: Bordeaux in the 2003-04 UEFA Cup second round – Mark de Vries scored a famous late winner in a 1-0 triumph. A tremendous trip from start to finish.
W: Any in Glasgow – we have a record of three wins in 37 games against the Old Firm there over the past 10 years.

OPPONENT

B: Tottenham came up to Tynecastle for a Europa League play-off tie in 2011 and ripped us to shreds. It was men vs boys as Gareth Bale and Rafael van der Vaart ran riot in a 5-0 battering.
W: Hibs' 2012 Scottish Cup Final team were a rag-tag collection of inadequate loanees, fading journeymen and plastic gangsters. Brilliantly awful.

FACIAL HAIR

B: Sir Paul Hartley's goatee was unrivalled in his prime.
W: Jamie Walker sported a terrible porno 'tache. Thankfully it's now long gone.

BOY'S A BIT SPECIAL

LIEL ABADA

CELTIC

LOWDOWN So valued was Abada at former club Maccabi Petah Tikva, one old manager took the Israeli prodigy to Barcelona to mark his Bar Mitzvah. Later, 21 goals and 10 assists in 76 games proved the teen's potential – convincing Celtic to pay £3.5 million for his signature in July.

HIGHLIGHT Abada has repaid Bhoys gaffer Ange Postecoglou's trust with a vibrant start. His debut goal earned Celtic a 1-1 draw against Midtjylland in Champions League qualifying, but a delightful whipped assist for Albian Ajeti in September's 3-0 victory over Ross County hinted at a gifted winger boasting serious end product.

THEY SAID "It's not how you want to introduce young lads," Postecoglou said of Abada's plunge into the deep end, "but from the very start he's had a positive outlook. He's been good for us all the way."

WHAT'S NEXT? Abada's "dream" is to lift titles at Celtic, where he should stay for a while yet. The 20-year-old recently won his first international caps, with Israel in direct competition against Scotland for a place at next winter's World Cup in Qatar.

WHO ARE YA? | HEREFORD LADS CLUB

COULD BE The finest purveyors of birds, booze and banter in the Marches. Oi oiiiii!

ACTUALLY The youth side of Everton and Ireland legend Kevin Sheedy, and current members of the Hellenic League Premier Division. Founded in 1925 for underprivileged boys, they've since become a charity who specialise in training up talented youngsters of all genders and backgrounds. Lads, lads, lads! (And, er, lasses of course...)

THE UNLIKELY LADS

IVANO BONETTI

GRIMSBY TOWN (1995-96)

CREDENTIALS Three years before his arrival in England's second tier, winger Bonetti graced a European Cup final with Sampdoria. Starting alongside Roberto Mancini and Gianluca Vialli, the shaggy-haired dribbler agonisingly missed out on glory to Johan Cruyff's Barcelona at Wembley. Chuck in two Serie A titles – one at Samp, the other in an earlier spell at Juventus – and jaws understandably dropped when the 31-year-old moved to Cleethorpes.

HOW'D IT GO? The Italian instantly won acclaim by covering half of his £100,000 signing fee. Bonetti's stint was in doubt early on, though, after he went through the windscreen in a car crash and somehow escaped significant injuries. Instead, he fired the Mariners to second in the First Division by November, before it all went wrong... thanks to a plate of chicken. Manager Brian Laws, irate following a February defeat against Luton, gave his flanker a rollocking in the dressing room, then hurled the poultry dish in a pique of pure rage. The finger lickin' missile broke Bonetti's cheekbone – as well as his relationship with Laws. By the end of an awkward campaign, Grimsby had slipped to 17th and Bonetti left for league rivals Tranmere on a free.

THEN WHAT? Bonetti lasted just 15 games at Rovers and moved on to Crystal Palace, Genoa and Dundee, where he signed Claudio Caniggia as part of a player-manager role at Dens Park alongside brother Dario.

WHAT'S OCCURRING

IAN HOLLOWAY

With patience at a premium in today's game, new gaffers are frequently parachuted in to save dire situations. It's a scenario *FFT*'s columnist has found himself in numerous times – and sadly, not always ended in triumph

I'll try to give you an insight into what it's like going into a dressing room that's got used to losing. It's never easy and isn't usually a very nice place to be. There are reasons why you've been handed the reins in the first place, aren't there?

To be honest, I'll start by saying that I didn't stand out in those situations: I couldn't keep either QPR or Leicester up, although I did win promotion with Crystal Palace in 2012-13. One thing I eventually learned is that it's about you adapting your style, not just your new players. I don't think I did that well if I'm being brutal with myself – I demanded and expected things that were maybe too much. I'd like to think that I give people confidence, but it didn't always seem to work that way. When I took over with a pre-season, it always went better – like at Plymouth, for example, when we started great.

It's tough because you've just had someone in before you saying things in a different way, and you don't have a window to work in. You can't slag off the person you've replaced, though – it's not right. You know that some of your lads would have died to play for that gaffer, so you have to be totally respectful. Remember what happened when Brian Clough, probably the best manager of my lifetime with Sir Alex Ferguson, went to Leeds. He was so negative about what those players had done and the way they'd achieved it with Don Revie, and they weren't having any of it.

No matter how bleak a situation, though, you walk in and believe you can make anyone change. Sadly in reality, not everyone is Bill Shankly who says "we'll be in Europe in two years" – then actually does it. It's a balance: trying to convey what was going wrong before, and what you want now to really change the mentality. Ultimately, that's why teams win and lose.

When a new manager comes in, he's often dealing with different types of player: those who've been left out so try a bit harder with a fresh start; those who didn't want the old boss to go and don't particularly like you. It's your job to get everyone facing the same way and explain to them: *I'm* part of this now, too. Your opening 90 days in the job are so crucial; the impression you make on the training ground, the fans and the board.

"YOUR OPENING 90 DAYS IN THE JOB ARE SO CRUCIAL: THE IMPRESSION YOU MAKE ON THE TRAINING GROUND, THE SUPPORTERS AND THE BOARD"

With how much players earn now, it's even harder to make changes. You can only bar players from training or send them to the under-23s, but even then you'll have the PFA on your case because it's not deemed fair – they're being stopped from having a career due to a transfer window. Then there's the number of teams under transfer embargoes these days – what are you going to do then?

Palace was the easiest job for me to go into, because the group was really motivated. I don't think they properly understood why their last manager [Dougie Freedman] left to join a club struggling in the same league [Bolton]. The issue there was that I was asked to change their style of play despite the fact they were doing very well – that's hard, as a team has generally been set up to play in a way they were designed to. Leicester in 2007 was the toughest by far. They'd had two managers that season, and with the way their finances were, they'd have been in trouble if they hadn't gone back up to the Championship when they did. I'd left some fantastic supporters who liked me at Plymouth, and a group of players who were buzzing, but joined Leicester and couldn't affect anything. DJ Campbell didn't want to play for me as the club had sacked Martin Allen, but then the following year I took him to Blackpool and we went up. Nigel Pearson came in at Leicester and sorted things out, and then wow... eight years later they're Premier League champions! Football has a strange way of working.

Some bosses are political and do homework on possible jobs, but I never have. I've just gone with a feeling for clubs and their people. I should have cared more about that, as a club like Leicester was dysfunctional back then: the squad was too heavy and overpaid, and they weren't good enough. They didn't care enough.

Getting a management job today is harder than it's ever been. People take jobs because they need the work, which can lead to problems further down the road. When you're there, you have to find a way to make things work... any way you can.

NON-LEAGUE NEWS

LIVERPOOL IS... PURPLE?!

City of Liverpool are the brainchild of Reds and Blues, with very different ideals

The qualifying rounds of the FA Cup feature a fine array of non-league clubs. Traditional employers' outfits take on cultural communities – or village sides with names nabbed off a cheeseboard (yes you, Charnock Richard). Then the odd metropolis pops up amid the hamlets, and you wonder: who are City of Liverpool FC? Just an inclusive, fan-oriented socialist utopia, that's all.

COLFC played their maiden fixture in 2016, but the dream formed from the embers of a 1980s nightmare.

"After the Heysel disaster in 1985, I and others began looking into how football was run and why fans were bottom of the pile," says co-founder Peter Furmedge. "Bonds formed in the '80s remained strong, and with the formation of AFC Liverpool [in 2008] and FC United of Manchester [2005], we discussed whether to abandon franchise football, as many saw it."

Politically and meteorologically, however, the North West requires a broader umbrella. Peter, chairman Paul Manning and like-minded souls realised this. "By design if not intent, those supporter-owned clubs would appeal only to fans of Liverpool or Manchester United," explains Peter. "Our discussions involved supporters of Everton, other clubs and no clubs. A group of Reds and Blues created the Purples: a club to represent the city of Liverpool's diverse identity.

"It's a united city: the Merseyside Derby can get tasty, but the football loyalties aren't decided by geography or religion. And it's a politically savvy city. Everton haven't gone quite as far down the global corporatist route as Liverpool, but many Evertonians know it isn't for want of trying."

Even allowing for COLFC's fetching purple kits – though not a deliberate mix of Everton's blue and Liverpool's red, says Peter, so much as the city's civic colour (and wheelie bins) – fans must come from somewhere. Where?

"I used to go and watch Liverpool'," Bill Sheppard tells *FFT*. "When I began doing shift work, it would have been stupid to buy a season ticket, but you couldn't pay at the gate any more. So, I tried local football. I went to Formby, Bootle, AFC Liverpool and Ebbsfleet's MyFC experiment – then I heard about a new club. Brilliant: I love non-league football, I love stats, and I can follow this from the start. And I liked that it wasn't a protest club, but a new club with community and social ideals."

Bill has seen more than 200 COLFC matches. The club is five years old.

"I went to the fourth game, against Stockport Town, with more than 400 other fans and got hooked," he says. "The atmosphere was fantastic. I just wish I'd seen the first home match."

It isn't always easy to persuade the curious to stay. Naturally, attendances suffer when games clash with Everton or Liverpool fixtures, and playing at Vauxhall Motors' ground doesn't help.

"It's excellent, but it's in Ellesmere Port, in south Wirral. We still attract decent crowds, partly through free transport we provide from Liverpool, but our attendances would double in the city itself. We're really happy with the core support we've established."

The Purps are neither red nor blue, but that doesn't mean they're neutral. They stand for inclusion, collectivism and common ownership, while their community activities include helping refugees and asylum seekers in the city. "We attract politically-motivated fans," says Peter. "With our actions and alliances, we're a socialist club."

COLFC dream of turning part-time down the line, but for fans, simpler aims suffice. "I want to see us beat Runcorn Linnets," says Bill. "I want to see us eventually move up the levels. And in 10 years' time, I want to read an article about how COLFC are doing in the National League."

See you in 2031, then.

Huw Davies

CLAIMS TO FAME

STOKE CITY

1 POTTERS ON TOUR

In 1967, a US summer league was created which imported whole teams from Europe. The 'Cleveland Stokers' listed Gordon Banks, Peter Dobing and boss Tony Waddington for the debut campaign, although the LA Wolves – swapping the Black Country for California – triumphed. A revamped Stokers appeared for the final time in '68, beating Pele's Santos... albeit with fewer Potters.

2 NEGATIVE FEELINGS

Stoke have never enjoyed an overall positive goal difference in the league – in 1888, they lost their first game and came bottom of the inaugural Football League season. Over 4,500 matches later, it's only got worse: the last time City ended a single campaign with a positive goal difference was 2014-15 (+3).

3 EUROTRASH

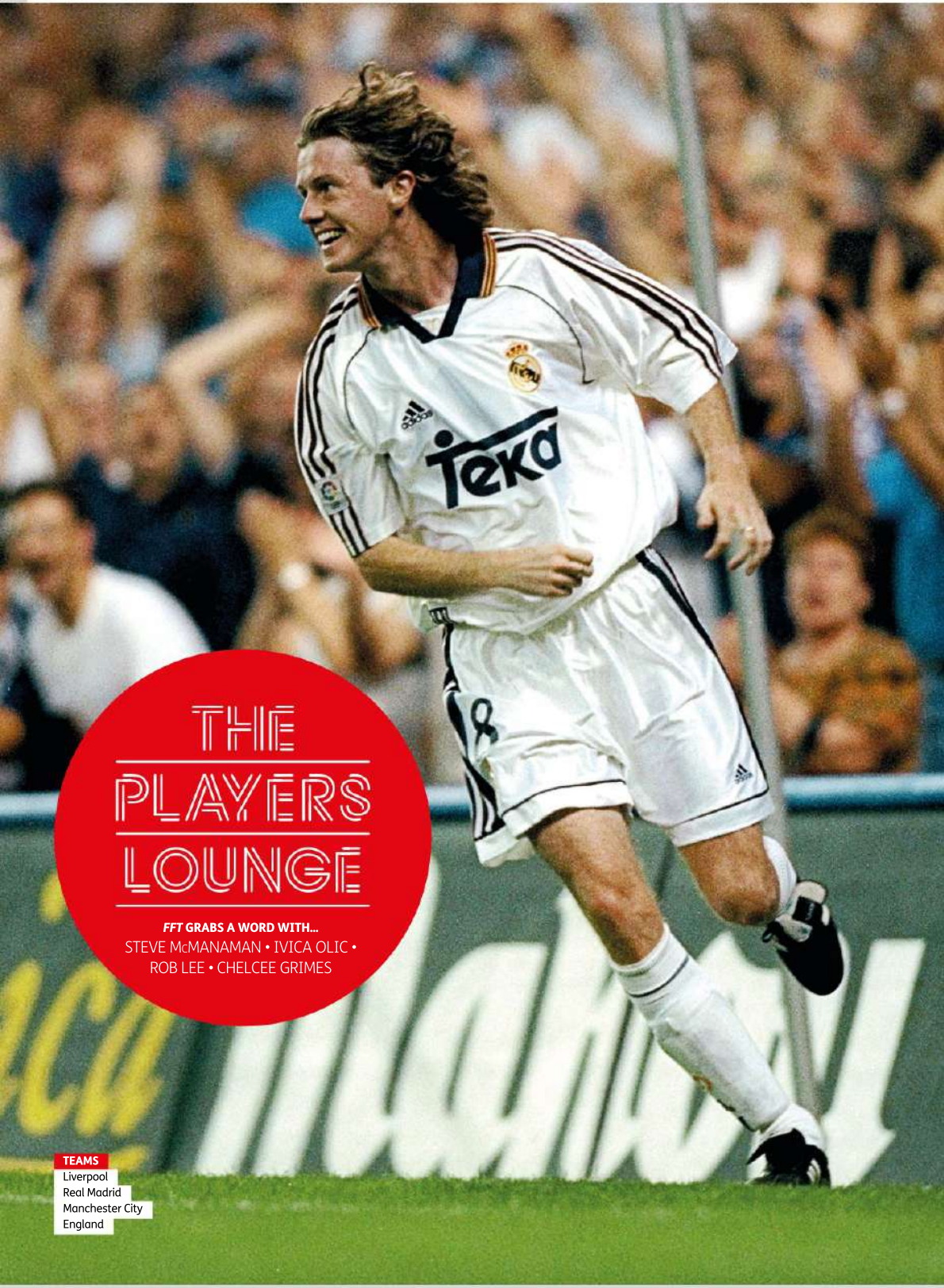
The Potters' relegated squad of 2017-18 included players who'd featured in the 2004, '05, '07, '08, '09, '10, '11, '13, '15, '16, '19 and '20 Champions League semi-finals. There were even a few winners – though combined, Darren Fletcher, Xherdan Shaqiri, Ibrahim Afellay, Jese and Bojan played one minute across their respective showpieces.

4 FRIENDS REUNITED

A player has netted against his club-mate four times at World Cups – the sides being Real Madrid, Inter, Juventus and Stoke. In 2006, Zinedine Zidane beat Iker Casillas, then Wesley Sneijder headed past Julio Cesar four years later. In 2018, Juve's Juan Cuadrado coolly slotted beyond Wojciech Szczesny, having seen Peter Odemwingie do similar to Bosnia's Asmir Begovic in Brazil.

5 LOVE AND LEAVE

Karren Brady flogged future spouse Paul Peschisolido to Stoke for £400,000 in 1994 when she was Birmingham's managing director. The Canadian striker couldn't have been too irked: he wed Brady the following year and they're still an item more than 25 years on. Aww.



THE PLAYERS LOUNGE

***FFT* GRABS A WORD WITH...**

STEVE McMANAMAN • IVICA OLIC • ROB LEE • CHELCEE GRIMES

TEAMS

Liverpool
Real Madrid
Manchester City
England

STEVE McMANAMAN

"EVERYONE USED TO GET CARRIED AWAY WITH THE GALACTICO NONSENSE. WE WON STUFF BEFORE THAT"

The ex-Liverpool and Real Madrid winger talks Terry Venables, King Kenny's boots and Champions League ecstasy in Paris

Interview Ed McCambridge

You grew up in a household that supported Everton, but your dad insisted you sign for Liverpool over the Toffees. Were you upset with him about that?
Not at all actually, as he just wanted the right career path for me. I was a bit of a home bird when I was 13 or 14, and despite being highly touted by several teams around the country, there was no way I was ever going to leave my mum and dad's house. I'd have been too homesick. We went to see Goodison Park and Everton were very accommodating and keen for me to join as a schoolboy. But that would only have been a contract from age 14 to 16. Then I went to Liverpool and they pushed the boat out a lot more. Kenny Dalglish was the manager at the time – he told me how much the club wanted me and gave me some boots he wore in an Intercontinental Cup final. They were too big for me but I was blown away – it was chalk and cheese between the two clubs.

You were famously the player that gave Sir Alex Ferguson and many other managers headaches in the '90s, with Bryan Robson's line, "If you stop McManaman, you stop Liverpool", still regularly quoted. Why were you such a difficult guy for other teams to handle during that era?
I always tried to find myself in little pockets of space, because I knew I was good on the ball and could turn quickly. I was direct – I loved running at people and taking opponents on. I think we also played different formations at Liverpool to what other managers were using at the time. I could play wide or drift into the middle and pick up passes from John Barnes or Jamie Redknapp. Then I turned and ran at players. It was effective.

You lifted the FA Cup in 1992, then scored both goals as Liverpool beat Bolton 2-1 to win the 1995 League Cup Final. Do you feel that Liverpool team should have won a lot more trophies?
There's always teams that will go, 'Oh yeah, we could have won more', but that's just the way of the world – that's football. I thought we were the best side in the 1995-96 season, actually. We took four points off Manchester United in the league and then played them again in the FA Cup final. We lost in the dying minutes to an Eric Cantona goal, but it really could have gone either way. Perhaps if we'd signed one or two different players around that time we might have won a league title, but that overlooks how strong Manchester United were in that period. They were one of the best teams in history.

Just after you joined Real Madrid on a free transfer in the summer of 1999, Raul told the press that he felt sorry for new signings like you, describing the dressing room as "a cesspit of lies, treachery and whispers". That must have been quite the welcome...
To be honest, I never saw any of that. I think Raul said it because of what had happened during the previous season. There had been several difficult players in the dressing room who'd clashed with team-mates, and Real hadn't won any trophies that year. But then Davor Suker, Christian Panucci and Clarence Seedorf left the club – huge characters. So when I came into the team, the dressing room was fine. It was more Spanish run, which was how they liked it. Captain Manolo Sanchis was the godfather, with Fernando Hierro number two. Raul was still really young, 22, but already a key figure. So when I joined there wasn't a huge amount of treachery or lies.

You played with some world-class talents at the Bernabeu, arriving shortly before the Galacticos era began. What was it like to work alongside Zinedine Zidane, Luis Figo and Ronaldo?
I find it a little strange, as when we won the Champions League in my first year, we didn't have any of those players. I think people get carried away with all this Galactico nonsense because of the name that it conjures up. The likes of Roberto Carlos, Raul and Hierro, who weren't necessarily regarded as Galacticos before that period, took umbrage to the word because they believed they were the better players. However, when Figo came in [from Barcelona in 2000], he was a brilliant player. A great lad, too. The one thing you would say about those players is, they were very good professionals. They walked into the dressing room and never rocked the boat. Luis spoke Spanish so he settled in quickly. The following year Zidane arrived from Juventus, and then Ronaldo signed from Inter in 2002 and we won the league that season. They were great to play alongside, but we'd been successful before they joined so the Galactico tag didn't matter one jot to us.

You played a major role in the 1999-2000 Champions League triumph, scoring in the Paris final against Valencia, and went on to become a popular figure in Madrid. How does it feel to be held in such high esteem by former team-mates, coaches and fans?
Extremely nice. I'm not particularly bothered about fame, fortune and all that, though it's satisfying to be acknowledged by your peers – the people you played with. That's the most important thing for me, to be honest, as you train with them, you live with them every day and you become close friends. So to return to Madrid and play in the old boys games with each other, have a drink and a joke with them is fantastic. You know, we're actually all still in a WhatsApp group together which we use to stay in touch. It's special.

You were one of England's stars at Euro 96, making the team of the tournament and even being labelled the star man by Pele. Terry Venables clearly knew how to get the best out of you in a Three Lions shirt, so why didn't things work out under successor Glenn Hoddle?
Euro 96 was amazing. Everybody had a great time, the football went really well and Terry Venables was an excellent manager. Maybe I never played well enough for Glenn, which was absolutely fine. He had his own system and players he liked, and that's always the case with coaches, especially at international level. I'd love to have played more, obviously, but I had my injury problems as well.

Steve was speaking on behalf of BT Sport, the home of Champions League football – watch games on TV, online and on the BT Sport app

IVICA OLIC

"MY PENALTY MISS IN THE SHOOTOUT AGAINST CHELSEA IN 2012 HURTS TO THIS DAY – I CAN NEVER FORGET IT"

The Croat recalls Champions League heartbreak, changing Van Gaal's mind and ruining England's Euro 2008 dreams

Interview Lukas Vrablik

You signed for Bayern Munich in 2009 but faced big competition upfront with Mario Gomez, Miroslav Klose and Luca Toni in the squad. Was it hard to break into the team?
Definitely. After I arrived from Hamburg, the coach who signed me, Jupp Heynckes, soon left and his replacement, Louis van Gaal, said I wasn't in his plans. At the start I was often sat on the bench, but after a few weeks Louis could see how hard I trained and how much I cared about the team. It helped that I was at the peak of my career. He told me that if I continued to practise well, I'd get chances. At first I thought he was just saying that, but it turned out to be true. I've always had a lot of respect for him for the way he recognised my effort and eventually changed his mind. He encouraged me to perform every day, and I ended up having some of the most beautiful and best moments of my career with Bayern.

Is it true it had been your childhood dream to play for the German giants?
For a lot of Croatian kids it's a dream club, as Bavaria is 500km away from where I grew up. Bayern were always a very strong team and their matches were often shown on Croatian television. Other kids admired Barcelona and Real Madrid, but for me it was always Bayern Munich. Another reason I was thrilled about the opportunity to join them was that Munich is a brilliant city. I loved my three years there and loved playing an important role at such a fantastic club.

Bayern is well-known as a club that always has a winning mentality. Did you feel that pressure as players?
Yes, from the first day actually. When I looked around me, I saw Klose, Gomez, Philipp Lahm, Bastian Schweinsteiger, Mark van Bommel... so much quality. We had a wonderful team. When you go into a game as a Bayern player, you are feared and respected, as everybody knows that Bayern give 100 per cent in every match. That's how they win so many titles. It really is, as you say, a winning mentality. And of course that's just as true today. For many years, Bayern have belonged to the greatest sides in Europe.

You hit a hat-trick in the 2010 Champions League semi-final second leg against Lyon. Was that your best game in a Bayern shirt?
Yes, it's something special if you score three goals in a Champions League game. It stays with you forever. However, the best and most beautiful moment I experienced with Bayern was my injury-time goal against Manchester United in the quarter-final first-leg, which we won 2-1 in Munich. I'll never forget that one. After I scored, I had a feeling that the whole stadium would explode.

Your time at Bayern ended on a sour note, losing the 2012 Champions League Final to Chelsea in Munich and missing a penalty in the shootout...
That was my second Champions League final loss, too [following the 2010 defeat to Inter in Madrid]. That still hurts me and I carry a lot of pain over it to this day. It's not easy to get to the final twice, so I'm proud to have played in these big games, but that little bit of pain remains with you. I never got to lift the trophy and that saddens me deeply.

You did win the UEFA Cup at CSKA Moscow earlier in your career, in 2004-05. Does that partly make up for it?
In a way. Lifting the UEFA Cup was nice and it would be cool to have a Champions League winner's medal as well, but it's OK. When you reach the final, both teams have come a long way and there has to be a winner and a loser. Sometimes things don't go your way.

You won 104 caps for Croatia. Did you ever believe that you'd achieve that?
It was a dream for me as a boy to play for the national team. I felt lucky to play one match for Croatia in 2002, and kept going until 2015.

TEAMS
Marsonia
Hertha Berlin
NK Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb
CSKA Moscow
Hamburg
Bayern Munich
Wolfsburg
1860 Munich
Croatia

I was fortunate that I could win so many caps given how long and how often I was injured in my career; one time eight months, another time a year. It makes me proud.

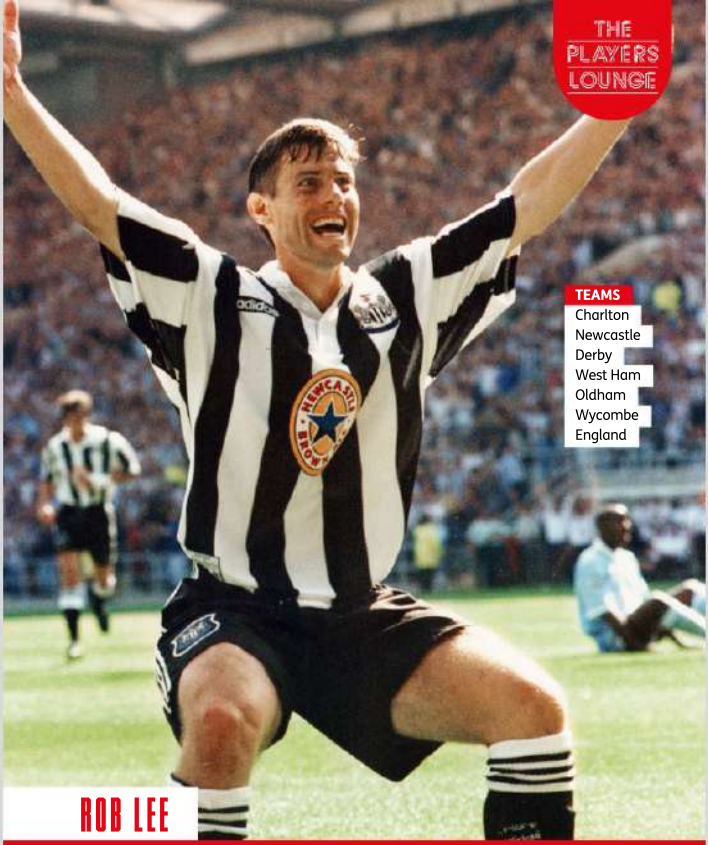
Ex-Croatia boss Slaven Bilic called you "the king of big games". Was that mentality key to your success?
It was in my blood. It was my main strength and helped me to become a fan favourite at all of my clubs. You can't just turn up and say you play like that – it needs to be part of you. Even as a youngster, I cried if my team lost.

You scored as Croatia beat England 3-2 at Wembley and denied them a place at Euro 2008. How special was that famous clash?
Back then we played under Bilic and achieved our goal: we got to Euro 2008. That match at Wembley wasn't so important for us, but for England it was huge. They needed a result to qualify, or Russia would go to the tournament instead. We had a terrific team and delivered a big performance. Eduardo gave me a super pass at the perfect moment and I scored the second goal. I was so happy. Of course it was a pity that a big country like England couldn't go to the Euros, but that's football.

You were an assistant to coach Zlatko Dalic when Croatia reached the 2018 World Cup Final. What did that mean for you?
After I stopped playing at the age of 37, I said I wanted a bit of time away from football as I'd been in the game for 20 years. But two or three months after retiring, I received a call from Zlatko asking if I'd become his assistant. Obviously I didn't consider the offer for more than a second because the Croatian national team remains my passion. We went to Russia for the World Cup and I had so much fun – it was a different experience for me. When you only play, you don't really think about what it's like to coach from the sidelines. I'm proud that I could play a part in that achievement.

What's the main difference between Olic the player and Olic the coach?
There's a big difference between playing and coaching. As a player, you only have to worry about yourself; to make sure you're playing well. As a coach, you have to think about the whole squad. You also have to think about all the players that aren't in the team – you need to try to create a good atmosphere. Without atmosphere you can't achieve anything. You need a positive mood in the squad to deliver results. I believe a coach spends more time thinking about that compared to any player.

Which managers have influenced you the most during your career?
I've got to mention Van Gaal. It was difficult to begin with at Bayern, when Heynckes left, but Louis was a man who really stood by his word. He told me, "When you work like that, you'll play." Later on he had some problems because of his communication with others at Bayern. Louis is a special coach, but he wants to make decisions by himself. Perhaps due to that he was not great for the club, but for me personally he was a top coach.



TEAMS
Charlton
Newcastle
Derby
West Ham
Oldham
Wycombe
England

ROB LEE

"I WOULDN'T SWAP WHAT WE HAD WITH KEVIN KEEGAN FOR A BAG FULL OF MEDALS"

Newcastle's free-scoring midfielder discusses love for Shearer, difficulties with Gullit and pinching Gazza's place at France 98

Interview Ian Murtagh

You scored more than 100 goals over your career, but it's a goal which didn't count for which you're probably best remembered – an effort from inside your own half against Brentford which was disallowed...
Yeah, I scored plenty for Newcastle but that's the one Geordies keep talking about! Funnily enough, my son Olly scored a similar goal for Luton a few years ago and says he was even further out, but mine was a half-volley off the wrong foot! The goal was ruled out because Joe Allon, an ex-Newcastle striker playing for Brentford, was offside, and I think he was as devastated as me because he was still a fan. I tell everybody it would have eclipsed David Beckham's famous goal against Wimbledon, but it didn't matter as we won the game 5-1.

You played with some wonderful overseas players during your Newcastle days, none more famous than David Ginola – was he the best of the lot?
Well, he's right up there but the competition's pretty fierce. Who can forget Tino Asprilla, for example? Some of his ball skills in games and at training were off the scale. But Ginola does stand out, not just for his football but also his model good looks, his charisma and his body shape. God I hated him! [*Laughs*] Not a lot of imports had the impact he made on and off the pitch. Football came so easy to David. He could take corners and free-kicks with either foot, and glided past players like they weren't there. I wish he'd stayed at Newcastle a little longer than two years.

Kevin Keegan's 'Entertainers' didn't lift any silverware but won the hearts of the nation with their style of football. Would you have sacrificed the affection for just one trophy?
No, definitely not. I wouldn't change a thing. Those years were magical and even now, I've got a smile on my face speaking about them. I genuinely wouldn't have swapped what we experienced in that period, even for a bag full of medals. That was the way I wanted to play football. As a kid watching on telly, that was the style which got me off my seat, so playing for a manager who preached, practised and played that brand really was a dream come true. Today when I'm coaching kids, it's that philosophy I try to instil into them.

You scored a hat-trick of headers against Royal Antwerp in the Toon's first European game for 20 years. Quite a night?
It certainly was, and it's something I've got over Alan Shearer – he never managed three headers in the same game. Not many players have. While I'm ribbing Al, I'll remind him that he never scored for Newcastle at Wembley, unlike me who headed our equaliser against Chelsea in the 2000 FA Cup semi-final. He's got all his records and golden boots, but he'd have loved to score for his hometown club at Wembley. The Antwerp game was special, as it was the one which lifted me to a different level. Before that hat-trick, I wasn't too well known. Afterwards, everyone recognised me because it made headlines. Even though I'm right-footed, I got more goals with my head and my left than my right. Bizarre.

Alan Shearer and you are pals but clearly you like winding him up, none more so than on the day his statue was unveiled outside St James' Park. Spill the beans.
It's true I disgraced myself that day by letting everyone know it was erected on the site of a men's toilet! But seriously, it's an absolute disgrace that it isn't within the grounds of the stadium alongside those of Sir Bobby Robson and Jackie Milburn. If and when new owners come in, that should be a top priority. No one deserves a statue more than Al, though I've told him there should be one of me next to it!

Shearer and Ruud Gullit are now TV chums after they fell out at Newcastle. The Dutch boss didn't even give you a squad number, so have you two made peace 22 years on?
Not really. We're not golf buddies unlike Alan and him! But you become more mellow as you get older and there's no bitterness there any more. It's just our paths haven't crossed. I've got nothing against him these days. We all make mistakes, and while he may regret some of his decisions back then, I may have done things differently too. Had he given me a number, I wouldn't have ended up with 37 on the back of my shirt, which is what I wore when Sir Bobby took over. And that gave me the title of my autobiography.

You scored on your England debut, missed out on Euro 96, were picked ahead of Paul Gascoigne for France 98 but then made one brief appearance against Colombia. How do you reflect on your Three Lions record?
Everyone tells me I took Gazza's place in that World Cup squad, but no one knows for sure. When Glenn Hoddle picked me, I was 31 and a squad player. Glenn knew he could rely on me in several positions, but I was under no illusions about my role. Euro 96 was different – I was in the best form of my career, so was devastated. My Newcastle team-mate Peter Beardsley was also cut from the final 23, and I've always felt that had we won the title that year instead of being pipped by Manchester United, we'd have been in. It's still one of my biggest ever disappointments. It's a horrible way to be left out, so I knew how Gazza felt.

Having started out at Charlton in 1983, you retired at Wycombe after turning 40. Few players can look back on a career spanning 23 years – you must feel proud?
Yes. I never set a goal of playing after hitting the big Four–O, but Hoddle's former England No.2 John Gorman asked if I'd join Wycombe. I enjoyed my year there. We had decent kids emerging and I jumped at the opportunity to help them. Above all, I loved playing football.

You also got to fulfil a boyhood ambition by playing for West Ham...
It meant a lot to me pulling on the claret and blue. Growing up, my heroes were Billy Bonds, Trevor Brooking and Frank Lampard senior, so playing for the Hammers was something I'd always wanted to do. OK, I never envisaged it would take so long and didn't play much, but it was a very important box ticked. Mind you, I wouldn't have swapped my long Newcastle career for a few more seasons there. Joining the Toon was the best decision I ever made.

Finally, a geography quiz – which is further from London: Newcastle or Middlesbrough?
I'm still ribbed about that! The tale goes that I joined Newcastle over Boro as Kevin Keegan told me it was closer to London. He actually said that it was a bigger city, the train service was direct and there were more flights out of Newcastle, so I could get home a lot quicker. Of course, Kev embellished the story to such an extent that people think my geography is awful, but I've forgiven him many times over.

CHELCEE GRIMES

"WHEN I SANG FOR KLOPP AFTER THE FINAL IN MADRID, I HONESTLY COULD HAVE DIED AND GONE TO HEAVEN"

The footballer turned singer on writing lyrics for Kylie and making history at Soccer Aid

Interview Nick Moore

You grew up in Liverpool and began playing for LFC Ladies aged 10. How did it all start?
It was totally different back then, but I kind of fell into it. I had no brothers or sisters growing up, so when I was young it was just me and a football – kicking it against a curb for a long time. Then my grandad spotted the Ian Rush Soccer School in the paper and signed me up. I think he only took me because he wanted to meet Rushie! I was the only girl, but it was where Liverpool Ladies trained. Someone saw me and I got scouted. I didn't even have any boots, because I was only used to playing in the streets. I went for a trial, met all the girls and felt like I'd found my place.

What position did you play?
I'm a forward now, but I started out playing centre-midfield. My main skill back then was scoring goals from corners. It was like a party trick and I scored three in one season. I was always trying to lob the goalkeeper.

What was the setup like 18 years ago?
It was decent, and the quality was high. We had a lot of girls who are internationals now. Liverpool, Everton and the Tranmere Centre of Excellence were all doing well, but the real difference with today was that there was no money in the game. It was very hard to make a living through women's football, and at the same time I was falling in love with music – I got a record deal with Sony when I was 16. I began making serious money from that, so that was really enticing for me, and football fell away for a few years.

You sang with Jessie J at the Cavern Club – was that a breakthrough moment?
I'd already got my deal by then, but that was just crazy. I was actually in the toilet with my

TEAMS
Liverpool
Everton
Tottenham
Tranmere
Fulham
Merseyrail Ladies

friends before the gig and joked, "Imagine if she invited me up to sing". Lots of people who liked my music were at her gig. At one point Jessie said, "Does anyone want to come and sing?" and everyone shouted, "Chelcee!" We sang *Price Tag*, then she went down into the audience and let me sing my own song. That was one of those mad moments – I ran back home to tell my mum.

You also won a competition to use a studio owned by Ryan Babel, the Liverpool winger. How mad was that?
I do believe everything happens for a reason, and I was destined to win that competition. I couldn't have been more fitting – I'd played for Liverpool, I was a huge fan. When I went to the audition, everyone was singing Michael Jackson or Adele, but I sang one of my own songs and won. Suddenly I was in his studio, and he's a brilliant musician. After recording he'd hand out match tickets – it was a dream.

How did you get yourself noticed so that you were soon working with Kylie Minogue, The Saturdays and Dua Lipa?
With Dua, I've known her since she had 200 followers. For the rest of it, it comes down to my personal brand. I've always been myself. On my first record deal, I listened to loads of people, about how to dress and all that, and it didn't work out. I'd got myself to that place by being myself, so I learned not to listen too much to people in a boardroom. It's the same with TV – I've been hired to be myself. There aren't that many Scousers on the telly. I tell everyone, "Be yourself and be authentic – it'll get you further."

What was it like working with Kylie?
I didn't actually meet Kylie. I wrote a song in 10 minutes in a Copenhagen hotel. It was my first time away from home as a professional songwriter. I jotted down the lines, "I feel like I'm a million, million miles from home," and then they sent it off to Kylie. She wrote back and said, "I love it". After that I thought, "OK, I really am a songwriter."

And now you've got a Grammy nomination with Dua Lipa...
It's been an inspirational journey. I can still remember meeting her – she was so excited to be in a studio. I did four songs on the first album and helped on the second. To be up for a Grammy and BRIT-nominated, it's beyond her wildest dreams. She's a lovely person and the sky's the limit. She's stayed grounded as well – she still messages me on my birthday.

Do you talk football with these stars? Tell us Kylie Minogue is a huge Tranmere fan...
Dua Lipa's dad is an Arsenal fan, so he gave me stick for playing for Spurs. Tom Grennan's a good footballer – I played him on *Match of the Day X*. And Olly Murs has his own team in Essex. They're the big ballers in the pop world.

You eventually got your boots back on and played for some pretty big clubs.
I'd stopped playing at 17, but after six years out, I'd watched the Women's World Cup in Canada and wanted to play semi-pro again. I eventually got offered deals at Spurs, West Ham and Fulham. I picked Spurs, which was amazing, but it was hard balancing that with music. I dropped down a division at Fulham and had two very good years there, as it was easier with my music. Then I went home to Liverpool and signed for Tranmere. It's been a rollercoaster, but being able to play every week and do music, I'm lucky. I love my life.

What's been your best football moment?
Being part of Soccer Aid. I grew up watching Kelly Smith be the poster girl for every young player, so to share a pitch with her was really special. And I was the first female player from the world of entertainment to play at Soccer Aid – they'd all been England internationals before. If John Bishop and Paddy McGuiness are playing, I reckon there can be more girls.

And the best music moment?
Getting nominated for a Grammy with Dua is special, but I got to perform for the Liverpool players at the after-party when they won the 2019 Champions League Final. Jurgen Klopp, Steven Gerrard and Kenny Dalglish were there with all the players, swinging the cup around. I could have died and gone to heaven.

Who's the best player you've ever faced?
Fara Williams. She was a bit older than us at Tranmere, but came to youth matches and ran rings around us. She's the most-capped England player ever so you'd expect her to be good, but she was phenomenal. She read the game better than anyone I've ever seen.

And your top moment as a Liverpool fan?
Istanbul. That was the day I began to believe in magic. It's part of how I live my life. If I'm having a terrible week, I just remember what happened there and it gets me going again.

How do you keep going when you're busy with music, football and TV work?
I had a talkSPORT show going as well, so we need to add that in. All these jobs have their perks and downfalls, but I wake up every day buzzing for it. I was diagnosed with ADHD last year, and my life is changing on a daily basis. So because my attention span is pretty bad, it's perfect for me. What people don't see is the hard work that goes into making music, and on the training pitch. But I'm determined and I'll keep writing songs until the day I die.

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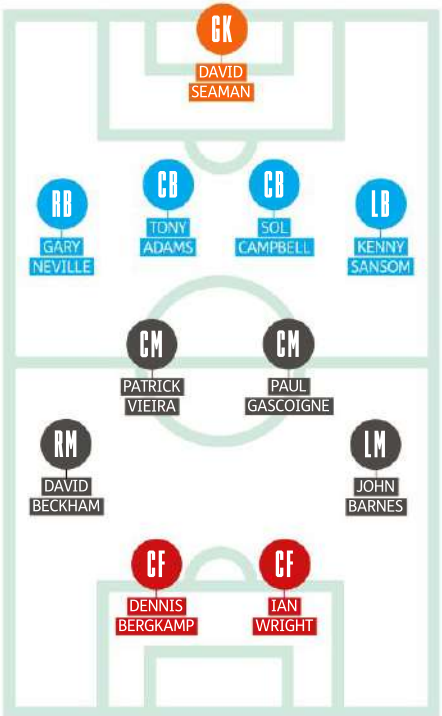
MY PERFECT XI

PAUL MERSON

The Gunners legend assembles a formidable side from a fine career representing Arsenal, Middlesbrough, England and more – but can't even find room for Shearer...



THE GAFFER

HARRY REDKNAPP

"If the players weren't so good, I'd pick George Graham, who was a master organiser. Harry was great with players and would get the best from this XI by letting them enjoy themselves."

THE SUBS

01 **DAVID ROCASTLE**

02 **ALAN SHEARER**

03 **TEDDY SHERINGHAM**

DAVID SEAMAN

"I played with Peter Schmeichel at Aston Villa and he was still class, but David was the one for me. He was so calm. We were well-drilled defensively at Arsenal and he was key to that. However quiet a game he'd had, or however under the cosh we were, you knew you could always rely on him."

GARY NEVILLE

"People forget just how consistent Gary was. Now he's on the telly, maybe we forget that for more than a decade he was playing this massive part in Manchester United's success, and was by far the best right-back in England. Lee Dixon was terrific, but I'd have to go for Gary – especially considering who I'm picking ahead of him."

TONY ADAMS

"Colossal both on and off the pitch. I saw him playing from a young age and you knew that this kid – if you could ever call him a kid – was going to the very top. He and I went through similar problems, and the way he's handled his addictions tells you everything about the man. A great leader."

SOL CAMPBELL

"We played together for England at the 1998 World Cup, and I could see he was destined to be a world-class defender. Then watching him at Arsenal after a big move from Spurs, you saw this calmness. That wasn't easy, the hate he got from the fans, but he took it in his stride and became even better. A class act."

KENNY SANSOM

"He was a monster. Stuart Pearce was superb of course, but when I started at Arsenal, Kenny was senior and helped many of us youngsters come through. He had legs like tree trunks and could tackle a brick wall, but my word he could play."

DAVID BECKHAM

"I partly picked Gary for just how well he played with Becks – the greatest striker of a dead-ball I've ever seen. The stick he received for what was at best a booking against Argentina in 1998 was insane. The way he handled the country being against him was heroic."

PATRICK VIEIRA

"We couldn't work him out at first. Surely he was a centre-back, the Arsenal lads said. He was gangly and had an odd body shape, but soon was bossing every midfield. Box to box, brilliant passer, up for the fight, beautiful at tackling. Pivotal to Arsene Wenger's success."

PAUL GASCOIGNE

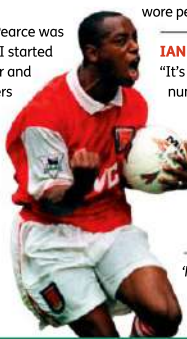
"The best English footballer I've ever seen. To have played with Gazza, as I did for England and Middlesbrough, was to really know how amazing he was. The things he could do with a football would just make you smile. He was my housemate at Boro and it got a bit mad. He was coming to the end of his career then, but his skills were still mental."

JOHN BARNES

"John was some player. When Arsenal were trying to dethrone Liverpool, he was arguably the best player in Europe. What he was doing week in, week out was up there with anyone, and I mean *anyone*. He got unfair stick with England, as teams would double up on him."

DENNIS BERGKAMP

"Until I started working with Dennis in 1995, I didn't know footballers could be that good. On the pitch, that touch, that ability to drop deep and find space... wow. Off the pitch, his room-mate Ian Wright used to laugh that he wore perfectly ironed pyjamas and slippers."

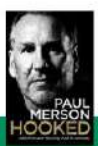


IAN WRIGHT

"It's hard to leave out Alan Shearer as his numbers were off the scale, but I loved playing off Wrighty [left]. Because of his late route into football, he had an infectious love of playing. It's easy to take it for granted, but he was so enthusiastic and that bubbled into his game."

Leo Moynihan

'Hooked', published by Headline, is out now



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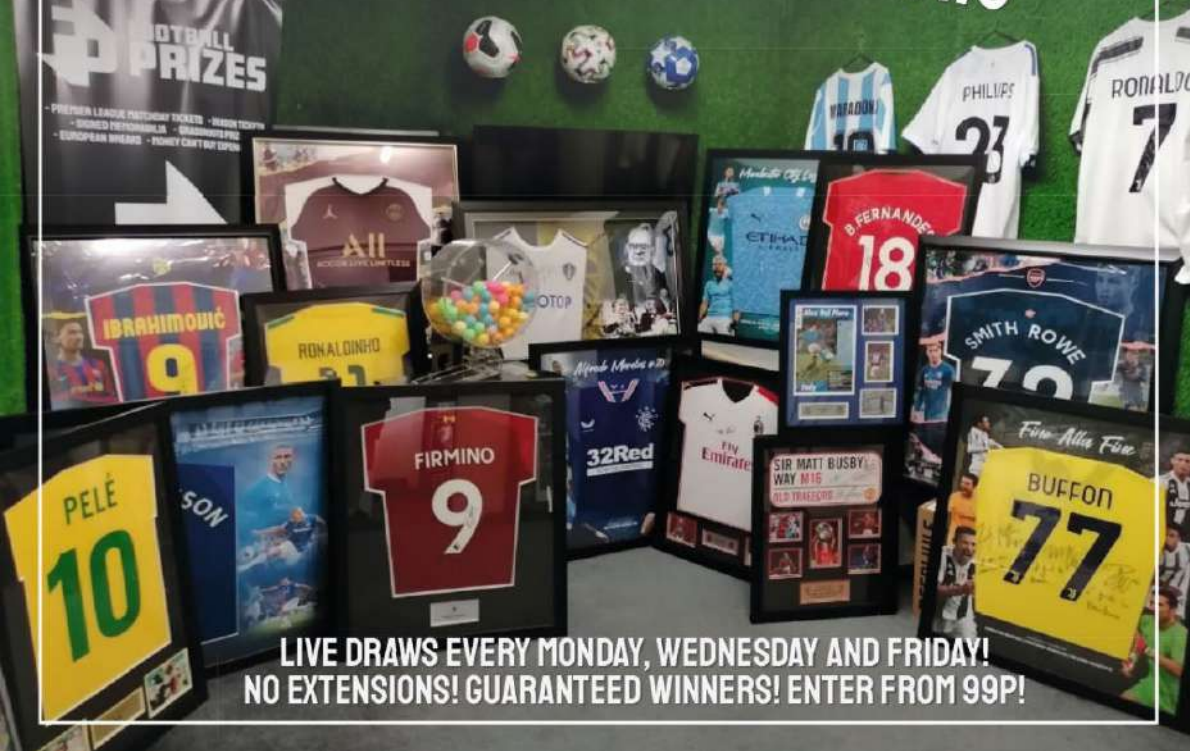

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